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BY
E. K. F. HILL. 3

“D;”

OR.
Branded for Life.



MARQUITA'S READING WAS INTERRUPTED BY THE APPEARANCE OF A STRANGE-LOOKING BEING.

"D;"
OR

BRANDED FOR LIFE.

BY K. F. HILL,
AUTHOR OF "SARAH BROWN, DETECTIVE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CORRAL OF THE PAMPA.

It was six o'clock in the afternoon. The month was February, the midsummer of Buenos Ayres; the place was a corral on the boundless pampa which extends in a waste of yellow sand from the confines of Patagonia to the suburbs of the city of Buenos Ayres, capital of one of the four States of the Argentine Republic.

The red sun, drooping to the horizon, sent his slanting rays across the desert, an unbroken plain, destitute of verdure, spring, or oasis, with a copper-hued sky overhead, and the monotonous land below, with never a tree save the gnarled *ombu* standing in solitary state far from his fellows, distorted child of the desert, which turns aside the ax that attempts to fell it, and resists the flame already kindled, refusing to furnish fuel to the weary traveler.

The corral of the *pampa* is simply an inclosure surrounded by a picket fence the boards are fastened together by light wire which permits their easy removal from place to place. Within are penned the immense flocks of sheep which are driven to the slaughter-houses near the coast, the mutton being sold to the slave-owners for food, the hides and horns packed for the European market.

The men who follow the trade of conveying the flocks across the *pampa* are termed *gauchos*. They live strange lives and wear a peculiar dress, and are noted for recklessness and daring; many of them are escaped criminals, for no extradition treaty exists in the Argentine Republic, and no official ever questions a *gaucho*.

Their dress betrays the Spanish passion for black, the loose trowsers, vest and broad-brimmed hat, and the *poncho* (a square piece of cloth in the middle of which a hole is cut, and the head thrust through) are all of ebon tint, but the broad belt worn beneath the *poncho* is usually heavily embroidered in colors. To this are attached the scabbard of a dirk knife and the case of a revolver; the *gaucho* also carries a carbine slung to a broad strap over his right shoulder, and wears immense spurs which jingle as he walks.

Inside the corral two men sat on their blankets near the fire, watching the cooking of their supper. Both wore the costume of the *gauchos*, but neither were natives of Buenos Ayres.

They were about the same age, some thirty-five years, and there was between them a startling resemblance.

The same height, weight, breadth of shoulders, and gait, even the shape of the hands and the feet were alike; but one of the men was a golden-haired blonde, the other dark, black-haired and brunette-skinned, though his eyes were also blue.

Both wore full beards, and both spoke like educated men, but the blonde was by his accent an Englishman, the blonde an American.

The similarity between them was startling; the features were of the same model as if they had been cast in the same mold, the hair and beard were alike in texture, only one was golden brown, the hue of ripe wheat, the other black as a raven's wing.

The two men lay silently regarding the sheep which hung upon a crane before the fire roasting slowly, till a hoarse growl from one of the numerous dogs in the corral aroused them.

"That must be Jupiter," said the blonde, rising lazily.

"Yes, I expected him to-night," replied the other.

The dogs had rushed to the opening of the corral, which was a gap in the fence secured by bars. A horseman had halted outside, and he struck his open palms together three times, which is the South American manner of ringing the bell.

As he dismounted he called to the dogs, who ceased their savage barks, and fell to wagging their tails, for they recognized a friend.

"Hallo, Jupiter!" cried the American. "so you are back already?"

"Yes, massa."

The negro, for the namesake of the god was black as ebony, advanced laden with bundles, which he placed beside the two white men; he then turned away and attended to his horse.

"Hallo! Here's a godsend," exclaimed the light man. "New York papers, I declare!"

"You still feel an interest in them?" queried the other, bitterly.

"Most certainly I do."

"Well, you are differently situated from me. I am dead to the world and buried in these gloomy *pampas*."

"Yes, your story is a sad one; but I have, at least, hope to sustain me."

"I've never heard your story, Fred; but I am certain you are no criminal."

"And you are right; I am a voluntary exile." Jupiter now drew near, and busied himself in preparing the *yerba*, the tea of the *pampas*, famous for its restorative and life-sustaining qualities. While Fred eagerly perused the papers by the uncertain light of the fire, the dark man lay watching him.

At length Jupiter pronounced the supper ready; the mutton was cooked to perfection, and the *gauchos* each cut off a portion with his knife, and ate it without plate or fork. They had salt and bread, however, which were unaccustomed luxuries, for Jupiter had just returned from Buenos Ayres, whither he had been dispatched for supplies.

The fragrant *yerba* was served out in gourds, and heartily relished by all; the negro sat down and ate with his masters. He also wore the *gaucho*'s dress, but betrayed by his tongue that he was no Spanish-speaking negro.

Supper over, cigars were lit, and Fred returned to his papers. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is the matter?" asked the dark man, impatiently.

"You inquired about my story, Lester, awhile ago," was the reply; "I can tell it to you now, with its sequel."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, look here!"

He handed over a copy of the *New York Herald* of a comparatively recent date.

Among the personals appeared the following:

"Fred C. G. is earnestly requested to return to New York at once, or communicate with his aunt, Lucille. His grandfather is no more."

"Does this refer to you?" asked Lester, with interest.

"It does; my full name is Fred Cameron Gordon. My grandfather was the younger son of a noble Scottish family. He came to America with a small fortune, and it grew to be a large one by successful speculations. His only son, my father, incurred his displeasure by marrying beneath him. He died young, and so did his wife, my mother. I was adopted by my grandfather, who was a terribly harsh, stern man. My aunt, Lucille, who never married, was a mother to me; but I, in my turn, angered my grandfather by engaging myself to Beatrice Maybray, the daughter of my tutor. He found out my secret, and overwhelmed me with harsh reproaches, bitterly assailing the memory of my parents, and declaring that the low blood of my mother was asserting itself. This was more than I could bear. I replied in a way I should not have done, for he was an old man, and I owed him everything, but I suppose I had a spice of his temper in me."

"And so you left home?"

Yes I walked out of his house, vowing I never would return."

"And you have heard nothing of them since?"

"Nothing I left New York the 18th of August on a steamer bound for St. Thomas, and I caught the yellow fever and was left there in a hospital. I came out without a cent or a change of clothes, and one of my fellow-patients and myself drifted to the *pampas*, and here I've been ever since."

"How many years ago is it since you left home?"

"Ten."

"Have you not communicated with your sweetheart—the girl for whose sake you left home and became a wanderer?"

"No; I always hoped I could make a fortune, till I found out my mistake."

"She was, of course, as poor as yourself."

"Yes, poorer. She has forgotten me, long ago; she was fifteen when I last saw her; she is now twenty-five."

"Shall you have any trouble to prove your identity?"

"Not the slightest. I have all my papers, here!"

He touched his breast as he spoke.

"And you are doubtless your uncle's heir?" said Lester, enviously.

"Yes, I guess so; my aunt would plead my cause; she was always devoted to me."

"Happy man! You go home to friends and fortune, while I am condemned to end my days here!"

His face wore a bitter look, and his tone expressed a depth of anguish and desperation that roused Fred's sympathy.

"Cannot I help you, Lester?" he asked. "I shall have plenty of money, and perhaps some little influence."

"No, no one can help me," returned the other, gloomily. "I am dead; don't try to resuscitate me; there is danger in the thought; but you merely drifted here, so can return."

"Yes, and now let us turn in."

"Yes, for I suppose you will leave us to-morrow?"

"Yes, with the dawn of day. I have money enough to take me to New York, and after that I shall be all right."

They said good-night, and lay down wrapped in their blankets.

The negro, Jupiter, had listened to the whole conversation with interest. He was an intelligent man, and he understood Gordon's story.

"Have a drink, Jupe?" asked Lester, whose second name was Allan.

"T'ank ye, massa!" said Jupiter.

The other poured out half a gourdful of strong cane-juice brandy, called by the natives *cana*, and the negro eagerly swallowed it, after which he wrapped himself in his blanket and slept heavily.

The sun shone bright and high in the heavens when Jupiter awoke.

He was alone!

"Whar's de folks?" he asked, rubbing his eyes—his head still felt heavy from the effects of the brandy, and he gazed around him in bewilderment.

No sound came on his ear save the tinkle of the sheep-bells, and the voice of some dissatisfied member of the flock, bleating pitifully.

"Whar's Mass' Lester?"

Jupiter walked to the opening and climbed over the bars.

On all sides were spread the yellow sands; he walked all around the corral, but no living thing was in sight; the blazing sky was overhead, the desert spread around in every direction, but no sound came from any earthly being; solitude reigned as completely as if Jupiter had been at sea upon the trackless ocean.

"'Clar' to king, if dey ain't don' clar'd out an' left me an' de sheep!" said the negro, scratching his woolly head in perplexity. "What in de worl' made dem do dat?"

He returned to the corral and began to prepare his breakfast; suddenly he started.

On the sand where Fred Gordon had lain down to sleep the night before Jupiter caught sight of something that made him start violently.

A fresh blood-stain!

"What am dis?" cried he, aghast with horror.

"Fore de Lawd! I'se 'fraid dey don' had a fite and kill one anudder."

He hastened away and examined the horses, saddles and bridles; both Gordon's and Allan's horses were gone.

"What dat blood mean?" asked Jupiter again. "Fore de Lawd, I can't understand dis yer."

He waited till midday, but neither of the *gauchos* returned.

He then saddled his horse and rode into the city to look for help to move the corral and get his flock into the slaughter-pens.

He also visited the tavern in the suburbs patronized by all shepherds and *gauchos*, but no one had seen or heard of the missing men.

They had disappeared from the face of the earth as completely as if it had yawned and swallowed them up.

Jupiter returned to the corral, and busied himself with the flock for which he was now solely responsible; but he did not cease to ponder over the mysterious disappearance of his masters, and the fresh blood-stain upon the sand.

The corral was moved away, and all that remained to tell that it had ever been there were the ashes of the extinct fire, which were quickly dispersed, and the shifting sand soon buried them.

The desert was left to its monotonous solitude; but it concealed in its bosom a terrible secret—the ghastly evidence of a fearful crime.

CHAPTER II.

A STRANGE PATIENT—BRANDED FOR LIFE.

In a crooked, narrow and very miserable street (if street it deserved to be called) leading from Chatham Square on the east toward those unknown mazes and miserable portions of the city that lie between the Bowery and Broadway, there stood, at the time our story opens, a very ancient mansion. The street was not only very narrow, but remarkably filthy, and it was lined with old houses that had known no repairs for many years. The dwellers in these rookeries were just such people as the dilapidated appearance and character of the buildings would lead one to suppose. They were from the dregs of the population of the city, with the exception of a few honest people whose poverty compelled them to live in the best of these tenements.

The house referred to stood about half-way up the street, and it was situated on one of the sharp angles, so that it projected one shoulder far into it, the street bending and adapting itself to the house, thereby proving clearly that the old Dutch edifice was older than the street itself. Its high-peaked roof, its small, projecting windows, and its many-sided gables, all were characteristic of a period anterior to the Rev. Doctor Jonathan. But, antiquated and dilapidated though it was, there still clung to it a certain look of respectability.

The shingles were covered with green moss and the heavy, paneled doors were brown and weather-beaten, and a bull's head carved wood over the front door was ready to fall from its place to the ground.

That mark is strange old man. He had inherited the house from his ancestors, who were rich Dutch merchants, but somehow the fortune had slipped away from him, and he was as poor as his neighbor's twenty feet a boro, save for the ancient mansion and the pitch oak that stood on which it stood.

And you can do No, the mark of

He possessed one priceless treasure, however, in the form of a lovely daughter—his only child.

Stella was just sixteen years of age, and beautiful as the vision of a heaven-inspired poet.

Her father gained a scanty subsistence by practicing his profession, for he was a doctor, and deemed skillful by his patients, who were, however, all too poor to reward him for his services, as they would gladly have done had they possessed as much money as good-will.

As it was, Doctor De Payster was obliged to go shabby and wear threadbare garments, neatly patched and darned by Stella's skillful fingers.

The old house was as antiquated within as it was without; its dark-paneled walls and dingy ceiling rendered it a cheerless dwelling, and its bare floors and scanty, old-fashioned furniture imparted a look of discomfort; yet Stella's bright face and happy laugh made the old man content with his home.

He attended his patients, or sat poring over his books, oblivious of the busy world, and satisfied with his dreary life. He loved his daughter fondly, but he never thought how cheerless was her existence, how unfitting her surroundings.

It was a stormy night, in the stormy month of March; the rain fell in torrents, and as it fell congealed upon the sidewalks and the walls of the houses; the wind tore and rushed through the streets, and shutters flapped and slammed to and fro all over the doctor's ancient dwelling.

The old man sat, book in hand, and Stella near him, for they could afford but one light, the old house did not boast of gas, and the dingy room was imperfectly lighted by an oil-lamp.

"Hark!" said the doctor, as a sound caught his ear.

A knock sounded at the door, which was loud enough to be heard above the howling of the tempest.

"Some one at the door, father," said Stella, and laying aside her work she lit a candle and left the room.

The wind seemed to whistle through the dreary old house, and the girl shivered as she left the room—the only one that had the comfort of a fire.

She unlocked the door and half opened it, carefully shading the feeble flame of the candle with her hand.

"Is the doctor at home?" came a voice through the darkness.

"Yes; come in."

A tall man enveloped in thick wrappings entered.

Stella could not tell whether he was old or young, for all she could see between the scarf that encircled his neck, and the slouched rim of his hat, was a beard covered with frozen rain.

He closed the door, and the young girl locked it, and then led the way to the room where her father sat over his book.

"Good-evening, sir!" saluted the stranger.

"Good-evening!" replied the old man, rising and eying his visitor curiously.

"I've come to consult you, doctor," resumed the man; at these words the doctor's daughter took up her candle and retired to her own chamber.

"I've come to you, sir, the man said, removing his hat and muffler, "because I hear you are the only man in New York who can do what I want done."

"What may that be?"

"Remove a mark from the skin that has been there for many years."

"Of what nature is the mark?" inquired the doctor.

"It is not tattooed," the stranger replied, hesitatingly.

"Perhaps it is branded?" suggested the doctor.

The stranger started and glanced around, as if alarmed by the mere mention of the word.

The next moment he laughed, though rather uneasily.

"You are right, doctor," he said; "it is branded."

"Then I fear it is beyond my skill to relieve you of your unpleasant companion," the doctor added.

"At least try," urged his strange patient.

"Show me the mark."

The man was soon stripped to his waist.

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"That mark is indelible. You must wear it

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rich Dutch m It is noticeable," replied the doctor, calmly.

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tion and the pi oath burst from the stranger's lips.

And you can do nothing with it?"

No, the mark of the branding-iron is indeli-

ble; science—or at least *my* science knows no means of eradicating it."

The man spoke no more, but quietly dressed again.

"Your fee?" he asked, in a sullen tone, as if angry with the doctor because he was powerless to aid him.

"I have done nothing for you," was the reply.

"No matter, you have tried."

He placed a five-dollar gold-piece on the table.

The doctor opened the door and called his daughter.

She appeared, candle in hand. In the dark old hall the girl's face shone like a star in the murky sky of midnight.

She was tall and slender, with hair of the palest gold framing an oval face lit by large, deep violet eyes. Her features were perfect, and her complexion pure as snow, and colorless with the creamy hue of the calla lily.

The stranger gazed at her fixedly.

"You are the doctor's daughter?" he inquired, as he followed her to the door.

"Yes, sir."

She raised her beautiful eyes to his, as if surprised by the question.

"Stella!" he murmured, as if thinking aloud. "Excuse me, young lady; your name suits you. In this dark old house your face is like a star."

He was near the door as he spoke, and Stella did not reply. She unlocked the door and opened it; as she did so a sudden gust of wind extinguished the candle.

"Ah!" cried the stranger, "shut the door; I have matches; let me light your candle, for you cannot find the way back in the dark."

"Thank you," responded Stella, gravely.

He struck a match, and once more the candle gave forth its feeble light; the girl's face was very near it. Close enough for the stranger to mark the exquisite purity of her complexion, the delicacy of the beautifully molded chin and throat, and the soft brilliancy of the clear, deep violet eyes.

"Do you live here alone with your father?" he asked.

"Yes, my mother died when I was born."

"Are you not very lonely?"

"No; I have never known any other life."

She wondered why he lingered. With all her beauty Stella did not possess one spark of feminine vanity.

"Good-night, Miss Stella," said the visitor. "I must not keep you in this cold hall."

"Good-night," replied the girl.

"Let me open the door."

He did so, and with a lingering look at the fairest face his eyes had ever rested upon, he passed out into the storm.

"What a strange man!" murmured Stella, as she returned to the room where the old doctor sat, once more deeply absorbed in his book.

She took up her work, but the face of the visitor seemed before her, and a rich color came into her cheeks at the thought of his lingering glance.

Meanwhile, he strode on through the storm, and exclaimed, as he found himself clear of the narrow street:

"I'll see that girl again if I have to feign every disease in the list of diseases. What a face she has! By Jove! it makes me forget what I'm about. I'll see her again if I die for it!"

With this resolve, he hastened on through the storm.

That night Stella dreamed of him. For the first time in her life she felt an interest in a stranger. She was as innocent as a baby, and had never wasted heart in senseless flirtations; she had no acquaintances, and knew nothing of love and lovers.

Had she been older and wiser she would have known that the man who came in the storm and darkness had awakened new thoughts and emotions in her heart.

For the unknown visitor she felt the first sweet thrill of the sweetest of all sentiments—Love!

"He liked my name," she whispered to herself, as she rose the following day. "He said I was like a star. I wonder whether I shall ever see him again?"

Yes, she was doomed to see him again, though in after years she felt tempted to curse the day her eyes first rested upon his face.

CHAPTER III.

THE RETURNED WANDERER.

In a stately mansion on Fifth avenue a lady sat with an expectant look upon her face.

She was no longer young, being long past fifty years of age, but her slender form was upright as a dart, her complexion unwrinkled and fresh, and her clear blue eyes bright as those of a girl of sixteen. Her abundant hair was white, but it was arranged in a tasteful fashion that well became her handsome face, and it was quite evident that Miss Lucille Gordon was not careless of her personal appearance.

Her dress, heavy black lusterless silk, trimmed with crape, was deep mourning, but very elegant, and her slender hands were jeweled and very beautiful, "a token of good blood," she often said.

It was a cold March afternoon and Miss Gordon sat near a cheerful fire; the room was artistically furnished, and everything in it testified not only that its owners were wealthy, but that they also were persons of taste and culture.

"Poor Fred!" said the old lady, as she rung the bell for the footman to bring her five-o'clock tea, "I wonder whether he has lost his love of home and his aunt Lucille. It is strange that he did not write, but I suppose he will be here, and so explain everything."

As she spoke a carriage rolled up to the door, and the peal of the bell announced an arrival.

"Louis, that must be Mr. Gordon," said the old lady, and she rose with a glad smile on her finely-shaped mouth.

Louis's fellow-servant opened the door, and ushered in a tall gentleman, who instantly came forward with outstretched hands.

"Aunt Lucille!" he exclaimed, in a joyous tone.

"Yes; why, Fred, how old you have grown!" she answered, throwing her arms about his neck and regarding him earnestly.

"Yes, dear auntie, no one grows younger but yourself."

Miss Gordon was now standing back and surveying her nephew with a strange expression in her eyes.

"You received my telegram, aunt?" he asked, as he seated himself near the fire and spread out his hands before it.

"Yes; shall I give you a cup of tea?"

"Thanks, I am fond of tea. Now, are you ready to hear my story of how I have spent my time since my grandfather drove me out into the world?"

"Not only ready, but anxious," returned Miss Gordon, whose aristocratic face had not lost its curious expression.

Her nephew proceeded to relate the same tale we heard under the sky of Buenos Ayres, the story told by the fire in the corral of the pampa.

Aunt Lucille heard it all.

"Beatrice Maybray is married," she said, when the tale came to an end.

"Indeed! Well, I thought as much. I never expected her to remember me all these years," responded Fred, with a laugh.

"Fred," said his aunt, suddenly, "how is it that you, who have spent ten years among Spaniards, have acquired a decidedly *English* accent?"

He started, and stroked his heavy golden beard a little nervously.

"I can't tell, aunt Lucille," he answered, "unless it is that my greatest friend in Buenos Ayres was an Englishman."

"That may be the reason," she admitted, thoughtfully.

"And now, dear aunt, tell me of my grandfather's death, if it will not distress you to do so."

"He was ill for six months, and he died very easily—seemed to fade out of life. He relented toward you, and you are his heir."

The man's eyes were fixed on the fire, so he trusted Miss Gordon did not observe the gleam of joy that lit them up.

"You are poor, I suppose, Fred?" queried Miss Gordon.

"Poor!" he repeated, with a bitter laugh; "why, aunt Lucille, I have not a garment but what I stand in."

"Is it possible?" in a shocked tone.

"Yes; I had barely money enough to carry me here."

"Poor boy!"

Miss Gordon's tone was more kindly than any she had used before, but her face grew cold again as she watched her nephew.

He looked handsome under the gas and firelight; his golden hair and beard became him well, though his face looked darker than seemed natural to a man of his blonde type; but the hot sun of South America could be held accountable for that.

"To-morrow you must see Mr. Dalton," said Miss Gordon after a pause.

Fred looked up inquiringly.

"And produce your papers, before taking possession of your grandfather's estate."

"Ah! certainly, the lawyer?" he answered, quickly.

"Yes; had you forgotten his name?"

"Yes, for the moment. It is ten years since I heard it, you know."

"True. You have forgotten many things, doubtless?"

"Of course."

"Hand me that fire-screen," said Miss Gordon, "and take this chair near me."

He obeyed her, and she drew a stand—which supported what Fred supposed to be a large volume with plush binding—toward her.

"This is my album. I am anxious to see how many of the faces you will recognize," she remarked, watching him sharply.

His bronzed face grew paler, and the clear blue eyes marked the change.

She opened the book; on the first page was the portrait of a venerable gentleman.

"My grandfather!" said he, without the slightest hesitation.

"Yes; and this?"

A man's face came next—a young man with an open countenance, and lips that wore a smile. Next him a lady, also young.

"My father and mother."

"Right—and this?"

A woman's face, a young woman, and he glanced at Miss Gordon to see whether the portrait was one of hers taken in her youth.

"You do not recognize that face?" she asked, in a strange, cold tone.

"I really can't quite recall—" he stammered, uneasily.

"No, I see you cannot," she replied.

Her nephew looked confused, but she did not appear to observe it. She glanced at the French time-piece on the mantle, and rising, said:

"It is time to dress for dinner."

"You must excuse me for not dressing today, aunt Lucille," said Fred, as he opened the door for her.

"Oh, certainly; we dine in an hour. Louis will show you your room."

She swept away with a stately rustle of her heavy silken garments, and left the returned wanderer standing in the reception-room.

A smothered oath burst from his lips as he closed the door.

"Is it possible that she can suspect?" he muttered, uneasily.

The door opened again, and the footman appeared.

"Miss Gordon sent me to conduct you to your room, sir," he said.

"All right; lead the way."

He followed the servant to an elegant suite of rooms; they had evidently been newly furnished and fitted up by the loving care of the mistress of the house. A bright fire burned in the dressing-room, and the wanderer looked around with satisfaction.

"This is certainly an improvement upon the corral," he confessed, as he surveyed himself in the pier-glass.

Miss Gordon was also in her dressing-room. Her maid was rearranging the soft, white crimped and puffs of her snowy hair.

"Is it possible?" she murmured to herself, "that he could forget the face of the woman he loved so madly—the woman for whose sake he gave up home and fortune? I shall see Mr. Dalton to-morrow, and hear what *he* thinks. Something tells me that man is *not* my nephew, though, if this is an impostor, the resemblance between them is startling. If he has Fred's papers he *must* know what fate has overtaken my unfortunate nephew. I tremble when I think of it; but, surely, my heart would warm to him if he is really my poor lost boy!"

CHAPTER IV.

"GRIEF AND JOY GO HAND IN HAND."

MR. DALTON was more amused than impressed by Miss Gordon's suspicions regarding her nephew. The young man had no difficulty in convincing the lawyer that he was Frederic Cameron Gordon.

"My dear lady," said Mr. Dalton, "how many times has Fred been in love since he left New York? These little affairs of the heart do not make so much impression upon young men who travel as they do upon ladies who remain at home. You say he recognized his grandfather, his father and mother, and what more do you want?"

"That may have been on account of their positions in the album," replied Miss Gordon, doubtfully.

"Nonsense; you are too suspicious. I should have recognized Fred in a moment."

Half convinced, the good lady returned home, and tried to be more cordial toward her nephew.

He did not try her much in this respect, however, for he was very little at home; he soon renewed old friendships and formed new ones. He joined clubs and became a fashionable man-about-town. His aunt's deep mourning prevented her from accompanying him into society, but Fred became a mark for mammas with marriageable daughters, for he was one of the most eligible matches of the season.

He did not seem disposed to worship at any shrine, however. His heart was not at his own disposal.

Stella had often thought of the strange visitor or who made so deep an impression on her young mind. He had passed away out of her life as suddenly as he entered it.

Fresh troubles were in store for the young girl. Her father caught a severe cold during the winter, and it was soon evident—even to Stella's inexperienced eye—that his race was run.

He was confined to his bed by the middle of May, but refused medical aid, and Stella knew him too well to bring any doctor there against his will.

She was terribly tried, for money grew scarce, and she knew not where to turn for the scanty supply of groceries that she had been accustomed to purchase each week.

At length her last cent had been expended, and she was in despair. Her father did not seem aware that he had arrived at such a pitch of poverty, and he called her to his bedside and

wrote a prescription which he requested her to take to the drug-store.

"Tell him to make that up at once," he ordered; "I am worse to-night."

It was a lovely evening, and Stella left the sick-room with a feeling in her heart that the sun was cruel to shine through such rosy clouds when she was in such terrible distress.

She had eaten nothing for two days, and she passed down the dark old stairs, knowing the hopelessness of her attempt to carry out the sick man's request; she determined, however, to go to the drug-store and beg the clerk to trust her.

"How shall I ever pay him?" she asked herself, as she turned the rusty key in the lock.

As she did so the bell was pulled, and on opening the door she found herself face to face with a gentleman.

"Ah! Miss Stella; is your father at home?" he inquired, and Stella gazed at him in bewilderment.

She knew the voice, and she recognized the eyes, but in place of a black beard, she beheld a golden one!

"Don't you remember me?" asked he. "I have thought so much of you that I could not help hoping you thought of me, too."

"I did not know you," stammered the girl, flushing scarlet.

"No, and I know why. I'll explain that," he said, significantly.

"You ask for my father; he is very ill—dying, I fear."

Tears stood in her eyes; she was so helpless, and her troubles were so great.

"Indeed? I am sorry to hear that," returned the stranger, in accents of the deepest sympathy. "May I not see him?"

"I cannot tell; come in and I will ask him."

He followed her in through the dark hall which seemed so cheerless and dreary. She led the way to the same room where the old doctor had received him when he paid his first visit to the old house.

"Stay here; I'll see my father," and the girl ran lightly up the stairs to her father's sick room.

A terrible change had come over the dying man; he lay unconscious, and his breath came in short gasps.

A cry burst from Stella's lips; she had never seen death before; but she knew him, and trembled at his chill presence now.

"What is the matter?"

The visitor she had left below was by her side a moment after her frightened cry rung through the silent old house.

"Oh! He is dying! Oh! if I only had some wine to give him!" sobbed the girl, chafing the cold hands, and trying—in vain—to call back her father to a knowledge of her presence.

Without a word the visitor hastened from the room, and in a few moments returned with brandy.

He succeeded in forcing a little between the pale lips, and the old doctor opened his eyes once more.

"Father! dear, dear father," sobbed Stella, tears coursing down her cheeks.

"My child!" he said, faintly. "Poor child, what will be—come—"

His voice failed him; the heavy eyes closed once more.

"Oh! He is gone!" said the well-nigh heart-broken girl.

It was true. With one long shudder the spirit passed from its earthly tenement; the old doctor was no more.

Stella threw herself upon the bed beside the dead body of her father, and gave way to her feelings in a passion of tears.

"Is there no woman in the house besides yourself?" asked the visitor, who stood near.

"No, no one," was the pitiful reply.

"Then I shall go and find some one; but come with me to another room."

He placed his arm around the weeping girl and led her away. She scarcely noticed his action—her grief overwhelmed her.

"Sit down, Stella," he said, and he placed her on a sofa and took a seat beside her; his arm still clasped her waist, and he drew her head down on his shoulder.

"Stella," he went on, earnestly, "you are all alone in the world now?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Well, my darling, you must let me take care of you. I love you, Stella; I have loved you since I saw you on that stormy night."

Bright blushes dyed her face, and she raised her head from his breast—her maidenly modesty alarmed by his bold wooing.

"Forgive me if I frighten you, dear little one. I would not have dared to speak so soon if you had not been in such terrible trouble."

She did not speak, nor raise her eyes.

"You will let me take you away from this dreary place, and try if I can teach you to love me, Stella—will you not?"

She was very helpless, very desolate, and it seemed to her innocent mind that God had sent this man to befriend her in her hour of bitter need.

"Answer me, sweet one," he pleaded, clasping both arms around her and pressing his lips to her pure cheek. "May I take care of you,

dearest? Whisper just one word, Stella—say 'yes.'"

Stella covered her face with her hands—she felt so happy, and her conscience smote her that she could do so while her father lay dead in the room above.

"Say yes," tenderly whispered the tempter. "I shall devote my life to you, my darling," he went on, passionately. "I shall make you happier than you have ever been; do you consent to become mine?"

Stella was moved by this tenderness. Never in her life had she heard love's pleading; she was very desolate, and her heart yielded even before her lips whispered:

"Yes."

"My darling!" he cried, joyfully, "how can I thank you?"

His lips met hers, and Stella forgot her grief in her great happiness. She loved, and was beloved!

CHAPTER V.

BEN BLUNT MAKES A PROMISE.

"A MAN CONVINCED AGAINST HIS WILL, IS OF THE SAME OPINION STILL."

If this old saying is true, the author of it should have added, "and the same remark applies to a woman, only much more so."

Thus it was that Miss Gordon left the lawyer's office more firmly convinced than ever that her nephew was *not* her nephew, but some one else.

She studied him at all times and seasons, whenever she had an opportunity, and she was conscious that he shrunk from her scrutiny and grew uneasy under her fixed gaze.

She had frequently hinted at little events in their past life—trifles that she felt certain Fred would well remember—and this strange nephew evidently knew nothing of them.

Miss Gordon was a woman of a firm, resolute mind; with her, to think was to act.

She had heard and read much of false claimants personating heirs to fortunes.

"I believe in my heart he is an impostor, and if that is the case he has murdered poor Fred and stolen his papers," she decided; "but I shall not allow him to go unpunished and reap the fruits of his crime."

She dressed herself very plainly one day and left the house on foot. She was determined to act as well as suspect.

Taking a down-town car to Twelfth street, she walked rapidly east till she reached Second avenue. Two doors beyond the corner she paused and mounted the stoop of a plain but comfortable dwelling.

"Is Mr. Blunt at home?" she inquired of a tidy colored girl who answered her ring at the bell.

"He is, m'am."

"Tell him a lady wishes to see him on professional business."

The girl ushered her into a small, plainly-furnished room, evidently used as an office by the man for whom Miss Gordon had inquired. He was none other than a famous detective—a man, the mere mention of whose name struck terror into the hearts of many wrong-doers.

Miss Gordon had not long to wait. A brisk footstep sounded on the oilclothed hall outside, the door opened, and the detective stood before his visitor.

"Good-day, ma'am!" he accosted, with the air and tone of a person who never had a moment to lose.

Miss Gordon was closely veiled, so had an opportunity of studying Mr. Blunt's face while her own remained unseen.

She saw a middle-aged man, with iron-gray hair, a clean-shaven face, rather sharp nose, and brown eyes which seemed to observe nothing. The only noticeable feature in Mr. Blunt's face was his chin—it was both long and prominent.

"I called upon business of a very peculiar, I may say painful nature," began Miss Gordon, somewhat timidly.

Mr. Blunt bowed.

"If you will kindly give me your attention for a few moments I shall tell my story. I know enough of men of your profession to be aware that they esteem all communications sacred."

Mr. Blunt took a seat, and Miss Gordon related her story just as she had done to the lawyer.

Mr. Blunt asked a few questions and took down a few answers.

"Now, sir," said Miss Gordon, rather nervously, "what is your opinion?"

"Pardon me, madame; I have none."

The lady had long ago raised her veil, and Mr. Blunt marked the deep disappointment which was written on her face.

"And is there no help for me?" she asked pitifully. "Must I allow this impostor, murderer, for such I feel him to be, to usurp my dear nephew's name and place?"

"I did not say so, madame."

"Then what do you advise? I will spare no money, no effort, to learn the truth."

The detective paused to reflect. He then broke the silence which was fast becoming irksome to the distressed lady before him.

"You ask what I advise?"

"Yes, yes."

"Send a smart detective to South America. Trace your nephew's progress step by step from the day he left New York till the day he returned—if return he did."

Miss Gordon's lips parted, her breath came fast. She knew Mr. Blunt was a very busy as well as a famous man. Would she dare to ask him to undertake the task?

"Mr. Blunt," she said, hesitatingly, "dare I ask you to take the journey?"

The detective did not reply; he was deeply interested in the case. Miss Gordon mistook the cause of his silence.

"Name your own price," she said, eagerly; "I care not what it costs, and I know your time is valuable."

Mr. Blunt looked up quickly.

"I was thinking of my other work, but I agree; I am willing, and will go."

CHAPTER VI.

MARIQUITA—A MODERN MAZEPPO.

JUST outside the city of Buenos Ayres there stood, surrounded by a large and beautifully-kept garden, a mansion of considerable size and importance. It was quite different from the usual style of houses in that portion of the world, and betrayed by its appearance the fact that its owner was not a native of South America.

Such was the case. Signor Madura was of an old Castilian family, and had been born and brought up in Madrid.

He had visited Buenos Ayres for pleasure while traveling in his youth; while there he had fallen in love with and married a beautiful, though low-born, girl, thereby mortally offending his friends in Spain, by whom he was discarded.

Fortunately for the youthful pair, Henrico Madura possessed a small fortune in his own right; so, leaving his high-born father to nurse his wrongs, he had settled down and become one of his wife's people.

She did not live long, but when she died she left consolation behind her in the form of a lovely little daughter, Mariquita.

The girl was now fifteen, and a true child of the South; she was already a woman.

It was early morning, and Mariquita was enjoying the only freshness of the day. She reclined in a hammock which was suspended in the wide gallery which ran around the house. Unlike most of her countrywomen, the girl was passionately fond of reading, and she held in her hand a book of poems. She was very beautiful, her face a perfect oval, her brow low and wide, and her regular features molded rather than chiseled. Nothing could exceed in beauty the clear soft tint of her skin, nothing excel the liquid fire of her large melting black eyes. Her hair was raven black, fine and glossy, and her lips a perfect crimson, smooth and childlike, while the teeth they revealed when they parted in a ready smile glistened like opals.

Her form was full and round, and her feet and hands so beautiful that one could tell at a glance this girl had sprung from a race of aristocrats or idlers. No toil had disfigured the perfect fingers, or marred the proud arch of the instep. To the fact that South American women rarely walk is due the proud boast that their feet are the smallest in the world.

Around the garden, which inclosed Signor Madura's house on all sides, ran a thick stone wall which was overgrown by unsightly *cacti* that crawled serpent-like in all directions; yellow and white jasmine, and other vines laden with odors and lavish of bloom. Even the repulsive *cactus* would put forth blossoms that seemed strangely out of place on its leafless stem.

The garden was rich in bloom; the rare Coral Plant flourished there, the Indian Spear seemed to glow with spiteful crimson under the hot sun, and the Maiden's Love to shrink with modesty from the impassioned kiss of the king of the tropic sky.

Mariquita's reading was interrupted at length by the appearance of an attendant—a strange-looking being in a somewhat fantastic dress. He was of small stature, being less than four feet in height; but his black face was lined and wrinkled, and his woolly hair snow-white. His costume was singular, consisting of a loose jacket and full Turkish trowsers composed of scarlet cashmere, and profusely ornamented with gold lace. He wore a white turban, and bore a silver tray in his hand on which rested a steaming cup of chocolate.

"Ah, Beppo," said the young girl, pleasantly, "you are early to-day, are you not? Has my father returned from his ride?"

"Yes, signorita," replied the dwarf, who was a favorite in the house, and whose sole duty lay in waiting upon his youthful mistress.

"Indeed I was not aware that it was so late."

She drank her chocolate and left her comfortable resting-place to join her father in the large, cool dining-room, where he was drinking his coffee.

The morning greeting between father and daughter was very loving. Mariquita was her father's idol, and she loved him with the intense

affection which a motherless child sometimes bestows upon its father.

While Signor Madura sat conversing with his daughter, a noise disturbed the quiet of the early morning—a confused sound of loud voices, and the clatter of a horse's hoofs on the stone pavement in the yard behind the house, where the kitchen and servants' houses stood, remote from the dwelling of the signor.

"I fear the people are quarreling again," observed the master, with a weary sigh.

In South America every white man is obliged to maintain a tribe of servants, for it is impossible to get a fair day's work from any negro in that sultry and languor-inducing clime. Every experienced man or woman in the household requires a young assistant, no matter how light his or her duties may be.

"It does not sound like a quarrel, papa," said Mariquita, rising with the intention of investigating the matter. As she did so, however, Beppo entered with a startled look on his withered face.

"Oh, signor" he exclaimed, "please come out and see the man; I fear he is dead."

"What man?" inquired Mariquita.

"A stranger, signorita, bound on a horse, and terribly wounded."

Before the dwarf had ceased speaking, the girl was out of the room and hastening to the scene of action.

In the large yard, which was surrounded by dwellings of the negroes, stood a panting horse bearing an insensible form, bound upon his back with the long leather lash of a *gaucho* whip. The man hung over the saddle apparently lifeless, and great clots of blood dripped from his clothing and drenched the horse's heaving flanks.

"A murder!" cried the excited negroes, who stood around on every side; "the man has been murdered and tied on the horse; see, his feet are not in the stirrups."

Signor Madura, assisted by the most intelligent of the men, unfastened the thong which bound the helpless form to the horse. They found that beneath the *poncho* the man was wrapped in, he was still further secured in his strange position by a rope; it was a *gaucho's* lasso.

"Carry him into a chamber and place him upon a bed," commanded Signor Madura, and he hastened away to his medicine-closet, which was as well stocked as a small apothecary-store, for in South America a good supply of drugs is kept on every plantation and in most gentlemen's houses.

"Is he dead, papa?" asked Mariquita, eagerly, as she watched the negroes bearing the manlike form to the nearest guest-chamber.

"I hope not, my child," was the reply.

The girl followed the men, who placed the stranger on a pure-white bed in his dusty, blood-stained garments.

He was a fine-looking man, of some thirty years; a full beard of old-gold in color fell over his chest and almost concealed his mantle; his eyes were closed and his face the deathlike ashen hue of a corpse.

"Poor fellow!" murmured Mariquita, softly, "he would be handsome if he were alive."

"He is alive, my dear," replied her father, as he held the wrist of the unconscious man in his fingers. "You must retire, child, while I examine his wounds. Tell old Beppo to see that some strong soup is prepared at once."

A little wine was poured down the throat of the unknown sufferer and his garments were swiftly cut away by Signor Madura's skillful hands. Two ghastly wounds were then disclosed, both in the left side.

"Ah! Two swift thrusts of a knife," said the Spaniard, calmly—"almost enough to let the life out of any man; but this one is an exception. They have not let the life out of him, though, no doubt, they were given with that intention."

The wounds were soon dressed, the patient opened his eyes and, after a few groans inquired:

"Where am I?"

"With friends," replied the signor, holding a glass of wine to his white lips.

"But how came I here? Where is Lester?"

"He is safe," said the Spaniard, reassuringly.

"Was it a dream, then?" asked the stranger, faintly.

"Yes, it was a dream; try to sleep."

Stiff and sore though he was, the man was so weak from loss of blood and fatigue that he sank into an uneasy slumber.

Mariquita had given orders that a rich and nourishing soup be prepared, and an old woman named Mercedes was installed as the stranger's nurse. She was an exceedingly skillful one, and to her care the wounded man probably owed his life. She nursed him day and night for over a fortnight, during which time he tossed, raved and moaned in fever. He used, in his ravings, only the English language, of which the old woman did not understand one word; so his talk passed unheeded. In three weeks he was declared out of danger by the surgeons who had been sent for by Signor Madura, and he sat up in bed, pale and wan, but exceedingly grateful to doctors and nurse.

He spoke Spanish, somewhat like a native of

Buenos Ayres rather than a Spaniard, and expressed his gratitude with all the earnestness of which that warm-tinted language is capable.

"It is nothing," assured Signor Madura, carelessly; "were we savages we could have done no less."

"Not so, dear sir," replied the stranger, with tears in his eyes; "I shall never forget your great kindness, never!"

In a few days the young man was strong enough to leave his room. He was then presented to the beautiful daughter of his charitable host.

He looked a very different person to the blood-stained, insensible object Mariquita had seen on the night of his arrival at the *Casa Madura*. He was dressed in a suit of fresh white linen; his hair and beard were glossy and golden, his face pale and delicately tinted, and his blue eyes clear and bright as those of a child.

He saluted the young lady with courtesy, and his manners were those of a gentleman, though he certainly expressed himself in the language used by the lower classes of South American society.

Mariquita received him kindly, but Signor Madura made up his mind at once that the stranger's stay in his house would not be prolonged. As soon as the young man was in a fit state to travel he must go. The proud Spaniard had stooped beneath him when he chose a bride; his only daughter must not follow the example of her father. The man had come among them in the garb of a *gaucho*, he used the language of a *gaucho*, and no such lawless son of the *pampas* would he bestow his beautiful daughter.

As for the sick man, he saw the fairest face his eyes had ever rested on; he met a kindly welcome back from the mouth of the tomb which had yawned so widely for him.

Small wonder, then, that he fell at once into that state of happiness rudely described as a "fool's paradise."

Mariquita was kind; she was lovely, and the man was weak and felt the want of womanly sympathy. He did not observe the frown of disapproval on the brow of his host. He saw nothing beyond the flower-like face of Mariquita.

Several days passed, and they seemed days stolen from heaven, to the young man. Every hour he was in her company made Mariquita dear to him, but his love dream was at length somewhat suddenly dispelled.

As for the young girl, she too felt that she had met what poets would term her "fate." She forgot that this stranger must be what his dress and language proclaimed him—a *gaucho* of the plains, and no fit mate for a daughter of an old Castilian family. She forgot everything save that she "loved, and was beloved again."

The man had given Signor Madura no explanation of how he came to be placed in such a strange position. He appeared among them like a second Mazeppa, and no one knew why he so appeared.

The question was, did he know himself?

That question, Signor Madura decided, must be answered.

CHAPTER VII.

A MAN FROM SCOTLAND YARD.

MR. BENJAMIN BLUNT had several things to do before he left New York on Miss Lucille Gordon's mission.

He had to trace Frederic Cameron Gordon from his grandfather's house to South America.

To begin at the beginning, he must see and talk with the woman for whose sake the young man had become an exile—a homeless wanderer—the woman whose portrait the present Frederic Cameron Gordon failed to recognize.

She was married now, and the mother of children. Her husband was a well-to-do dry-goods merchant, and her comfortable home was situated on Thirty-sixth street, near Lexington avenue. Ben Blunt armed himself with a letter of introduction written by Miss Gordon and called upon the lady. He was too smart a man to plan beforehand his course of action. He knew he must be guided by circumstances, especially when he had to deal with a woman.

He rung the bell and asked to see Mrs. Gould.

He was successful so far; the lady was at home. He was ushered into an elegant reception-room. He glanced around and observed two handsome oil paintings among many others—they were both portraits; one was that of a fine-looking lady, the other—a gentleman, evidently her husband.

Mrs. Gould did not keep him waiting; she soon appeared, with an open letter in her hand—the one penned by Miss Gordon introducing the detective. Miss Gordon knew that Mrs. Gould was a shrewd woman, and she entertained a sincere regard for her, so she partly confided to the lady the reason of Blunt's visit.

"So you are a detective, sir?" remarked Mrs. Gould, signing to Blunt to be seated.

He bowed and glanced toward the door.

"Oh, that is all right; I am too strict a house-keeper to tolerate servants who listen at doors," said the lady, reassuringly.

"Miss Gordon has told you my business, I presume?"

"Yes; what do you think of the matter?"

"I can't tell; I've never even seen the gentleman."

"It is absurd to say that the man is Fred Gordon, if he did not recognize my picture."

The lady reddened a little; she was a loving wife, but no lady likes to think that a former lover has grown so oblivious of her charms.

"That is Miss Gordon's opinion also. Is it not possible that you may have changed?"

"No, indeed! I was only fifteen when Fred went away, and I am now twenty-five; but I have not changed so much as to be unrecognizable."

She took up an album and turned over its pages, calling the detective's attention to photographs of herself taken at short intervals from early girlhood; it was evident that being photographed was one of Mrs. Gould's weaknesses.

"Have I changed?" she asked, triumphantly.

"No," replied the detective. "Now, Mrs. Gould, you—I am certain—had a parting interview with this young man?"

"Yes," answered the lady, with a blush.

"And he told you how he intended to leave New York?"

"No; except that he intended to go to sea. He had no money, poor fellow!"

"He intended to go to sea?"

"Yes; and after he left the house, and, as I thought, New York, a sailor brought me a letter from him—the last I ever received, dated the 18th of August."

"Did this letter say what ship he proposed to sail upon?"

"Yes, the Wyoming—bound for St. Thomas."

"And you never heard of him again?"

"Never; I have always supposed him dead."

"I think your supposition was correct."

"And so do I. This man is an impostor."

"Well, madame, if you cannot think of any other circumstances that would be useful to me in my investigations I need not detain you longer."

"I cannot recall anything else."

"You have no sample of Mr. Gordon's handwriting?"

"No, I destroyed all my old letters before I married."

The detective left the house, firmly convinced that Miss Gordon's suspicions were well-founded.

Fred Gordon had sailed from New York on board the ship Wyoming, bound for St. Thomas, ten years ago, and had never been heard from again. He had died of fever, or been murdered, and the false heir had by some means become possessed of his papers and history.

Mrs. Gould was not aware that the Wyoming was a steamer. She concluded, and Blunt did also, that she was a sailing vessel, and the question was how could any information be obtained of the ship or her crew?

He went direct to the office of the Maritime Exchange; he there ascertained that a steamer named the Wyoming had sailed for St. Thomas on the 18th day of August ten years ago. She was owned by Coffin Bros., and Blunt found on making inquiries that the firm was no longer in existence, both members of it having been dead several years.

The detective left the office feeling somewhat discouraged, but determined to seek for fuller information among the seamen who frequented a Water street saloon.

He had learned of the existence of this place during a search for some river thieves, and knew that it was much frequented by sailors from all portions of the globe.

Returning to his home, Blunt took his supper and exchanged his neat business-suit for a pea-jacket worn over a blue shirt, loose-fitting trowsers and seamen's shoes. A glazed hat worn on the back of the head, while a black-silk hand-kerchief knotted about his throat completed his costume. He altered his appearance still further by sponging his face with a wash that turned it a ruddy brown hue, and affixing a huge, rough beard which concealed his mouth and chin.

He soon found himself in the place he sought. It was a low-ceilinged, long room, fitted up with a bar and several tables, where sailors sat and drank; they could also order oysters, ham, cheese or other light refreshments from a *restaurant*—so called—kept by the proprietor's wife in a back room.

The saloon-keeper was a short man, with red hair and shaggy beard; he had high cheek-bones, a crimson nose, and eyes which squinted villainously.

His beetling brows and low forehead added to his expression of brutal ferocity made up a countenance that warned the beholder what manner of man Swartzman was.

He was said to be a Russian, but spoke every known language, though far from a talkative man. Indeed, he was usually in a surly mood, and his customers scarcely cared to address him, except on business.

His spouse was, however, more genial. She was an enormously fat woman, nearly six feet high, with rather a fine face—that is, her features were regular, and her eyes large, black and bright; but she possessed miserly, grasping nature, and cheated every sailor who entered her door out of many a hard-earned dollar.

This couple were supposed to be rich; they had kept the saloon for many years, and were childless; they were never known to be absent from business, day or night, for they kept the place open far into the night, and Sunday was the same as any other day to them.

When Ben Blunt reached Swartzman's nine o'clock had just struck, and the place was crowded. He drew near the bar with a lurching step and threw down a five-dollar bill. He had entered the saloon in a noisy manner, slamming the door after him, and enacting the rôle of a man in a state of semi-intoxication.

"Looky here, mates," he said, or rather shouted, "come on and call for what yer please; I'm just off a jolly cold v'yge and I've got an old psalm-singing Salvation Army aunt in Brookline, and she'll give me all the boodle I want; let's drink her health, fer she's a jolly ole gal."

He finished up with a lurch, and sat down in a chair which happened to stand near him.

A number of men drew near; some of them had been ashore for weeks and their money was exhausted, others had plenty of cash still, but all were willing to drink at a friend's expense.

"Thank'y kindly, mate," said one young fellow, as Swartzman filled numerous glasses with vile liquor. "Where might you hail from?"

"Me?" inquired Blunt, stupidly, seeming to have half sunk into a drunkard's ready slumber. "I'm an Englishman."

"So am I," replied a voice at his elbow.

A tall man, dressed as a sailor, stood near him. He was a man of some fifty years, and his face was bronzed by sun and sea; but his eyes were keen, and something in their expression told Blunt that *this man* saw through his disguise.

Ben Blunt was no coward, but he well knew that his hours were numbered if it was known that he was an officer who had ventured into Swartzman's villainous place. A blow on the head, or a thrust with a knife, a quick plunge in the river, and a body at the morgue:—another disappearance, the mystery of which would never be cleared up; such would be the brief history remaining to tell; for river-thieves and dock-rats abounded in the neighborhood and came into the saloon to plunder seamen. The detective had heard whispers of dark work done there before, and they came back to his memory like a flash.

"An Englishman, eh, mate?" he said, cordially; "tip us yer flipper."

The other tendered his hand, and as he did so inquired in a low tone:

"What's your lay?"

Blunt knew the expression was a slang one used by detectives when they wished to ascertain whether a stranger was a member of the Secret Service or not.

He pressed the tall man's hand, and said aloud:

"I'm trying to find out an old mate of mine what sailed on the steamer Wyoming, ten years ago from this port."

The men in the saloon were all busy drinking at Blunt's expense, so no one observed the conversation between the two detectives.

A quick glance around convinced the stranger that no one was observing his movements—his back was toward the bar, so he hastily scribbled on the back of a card:

"I'm from Scotland Yard, after a murderer. Let me know where I can see you outside to-morrow at ten a. m."

Blunt hurriedly wrote in reply.

"Stevens House, 17 to 21 Broadway; ask for Stackman."

He then placed his arms on the table and apparently lapsed into slumber.

The drinkers soon exhausted the five dollars, but the detective had time to pour his glass of bad whisky into a cuspidore, before the sailors gathered around him. They shook him up, seeing no sense in allowing a man with money in his pocket to go to sleep when he might be up and doing.

"I've struck it hard, mate," said a ruffianly-looking longshoreman.

"Won't yer shout ag'in; I've got a wife an' family to s'port."

If he had, there could be little doubt that the wife was in rags and wore the adornment of a black eye, and the children were starving.

"Sartain, sure, I will. Let's drink her health!" hiccuped the detective.

"Whose health?" asked a would-be funny man.

"Naybuddy's health. Bridge's health. Brookline Bridge's health."

Again the supposed inebriate sunk into slumber, and again he was aroused by his new friends.

He now sat up, and, after a pause, pretended to feel some interest in his surroundings. He observed his companions with the swift, keen glance of men of his profession.

He had no difficulty in selecting the real seamen from the sham ones; for boarding-house runners and thieves were among them, dressed in sailors' garb and making use of nautical terms and sea slang freely.

One man attracted Blunt's attention. He was

no longer young, and his sun-burned face wore a dejected expression.

"You look like you'd seen rough weather, mate," remarked Blunt, signing to the sad-faced sailor to take a seat at his table.

"Yes, I've had a roughish time, but I can't rightly blame no one but myself," responded the man, seating himself.

Fortunately a new-comer, who seemed a general favorite, entered the saloon at that moment, and the attention of the crowd was diverted from the detective and his companion.

"How's that?"

"Well, like most of my trade, I've been a sight too fond of the bottle."

"Yes, that's bad. What'll you take?"

"A glass of lager; I'm looking for a berth, and I can't drink grog."

"Well, I'm on the lookout, too," said Blunt, when they had been supplied with beer by Swartzman's assistant, who was as ill-favored as himself.

"For a ship?"

"No, for an old friend of mine. He sailed from this port on the steamer Wyoming on the 18th day of August, ten years ago."

"Bound for St. Thomas?" asked the sailor, with interest.

"Yes, bound for St. Thomas."

"Well, I was second mate on that very trip."

"You were? Then you're the man I wanted to find, for you can tell me what became of him."

"Yes, that was the trip; the last the Wyoming made while Coffin Brothers owned her. James Coffin died before we got back to New York, and his brother retired from business the same year, and he died in a couple of years later."

"Do you remember a young man who shipped with you? It was his first trip."

"Yes, there were two men who made their first trip. We took green hands, and were glad to get them, for Yellow Jack was raging, and we had hard work to ship a crew."

"The season was unhealthy?"

"Awful, and the two green hands paid for their foolishness in going for their first trip at that time of year."

"Did they die?" asked Blunt, eagerly.

"Well, I can't tell you, mate. We left them both in hospital with Yellow Jack hot and strong."

"At Panama?"

"Yes; one of them was a regular dandy, white hands and yellow curls like a girl; he was a strong, able fellow, though, and we all liked him; but he was a gentleman."

"What was his name?"

"Gordon."

"That's the man I'm looking for."

"Well, I wish I could tell you more about him."

"I wish I could find him; an old aunt of his in Scotland died lately and left him some money."

"Well, poor chap, it is a pity if he left his bones in St. Thomas; I never saw nor heard of him since."

Blunt soon rolled from the saloon, leaving the sad-faced mariner to brood over his sorrow.

Miss Gordon received a dispatch that night asking her to meet the detective at his office the next day at twelve o'clock.

"I see plainly that I shall have to visit Panama," said Blunt, as he hastened home; "and somehow I feel that my interview with the English detective will prove that his case and mine are connected in some way. Pshaw! I'm growing as superstitious as an old woman."

CHAPTER VIII.

A HASTY MARRIAGE.

STELLA's mournful watch over her dead father was not a solitary one; her vigil was shared by one of her neighbors—a kind-hearted woman, whose good feelings were enlisted by the young girl's new-found friend. Even to herself she did not breathe the word "lover," for she reflected with a painful blush of wounded modesty, that she did not even know the name of the man to whose care she had intrusted the precious gift of her young heart.

Early the following morning a waiter arrived from a restaurant with a tempting breakfast for the two ladies. Of course Stella could scarcely touch anything, but her companion did ample justice to the appetizing viands, which were unwonted luxuries.

The undertaker had paid his first visit the night before, and he came again, and Stella sat alone in the sitting-room while her father was placed in his coffin.

Early in the forenoon her lover appeared, and the girl welcomed him with tears and blushes.

"You have been so good and kind," she whispered, gratefully, as he took her slender hand in his and raised it respectfully to his lips.

"You are well, dearest?" he inquired, tenderly.

"Yes; at least as well as I can hope to be," she replied, great tears welling up and streaming down her cheeks.

"Cheer up, darling; this is a sad day for you, but remember the 'darkest hour comes just before the dawn.'"

"Ah," cried Stella, in accents of the keenest self-reproach, "I feel as if I should never be happy again."

"Yes, Stella, so every one feels when death robs them of a loved one; but remember that you must try and feel that you must be happy for my sake, for if you are not happy I shall be utterly miserable."

"But," stammered Stella, confusedly, "I feel that I have been too hasty in giving you my promise."

"What? Do not say that you repent!" pleaded her lover, his face betraying his agitation.

"I have been so easily won—I—I—have never even heard your name."

"True, dearest. My name is Frederic Lester."

"It is a beautiful one," said Stella, simply; she had not observed that he hesitated before pronouncing the name.

"And a portion of it shall soon be yours, dear Stella," whispered Lester.

The conversation between the lovers was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Collins, who called Lester away to attend to some of the funeral arrangements.

Stella's father was buried that afternoon, and Stella herself became a bride that evening. She was quietly married by a clergyman whose church Mrs. Collins attended, and that good lady was the only person present with whom the girl was acquainted.

When the marriage was over Mrs. Collins said farewell to the young wife.

"You have a generous husband," the poor woman—who was a widow—said, gratefully. "To think you are married, and me living in the next house and never knew you were even keeping company with any one!"

Stella did not reply; she could not find courage to confess how little she knew of the man who was now her husband.

Mrs. Collins had been handsomely paid by Lester for her services, so she was satisfied.

The girl did not return to her old home again; she had little luggage, and Mrs. Collins did her packing. The dress she wore had been purchased for her by her husband. It was a handsome one, elaborately trimmed with crape, and the deep black set off her blonde beauty to the utmost; her hat and heavy veil framed her lovely fair face, and her waving golden hair shone brighter from its somber surrounding.

"A lovely bride," murmured the widow, as the carriage drove away with the newly married pair. "But, dear me, I wouldn't like to marry the day my father was laid in his grave, and in a black dress all covered with crape like a mourner at a funeral. Poor thing! I hope she'll be happy—she has a rich husband, anyhow. I wonder how on earth she got acquainted with him."

The widow sighed, and returned to her humble home; she felt sad, though her pocketbook was better filled than it had been for many

CHAPTER IX.

TRAILING A MURDERER.

WHEN Blunt entered the waiting-room at the Stevens House he found that the Scotland Yard detective had arrived before him. A gentleman who had inquired for Mr. Stackman was in the parlor, he was informed by a bell-boy.

The detective glanced around at the persons assembled there, but failed to recognize his acquaintance of the previous night.

"My name is Stackman," he said, after waiting a moment.

A tall gentleman, elegantly dressed, and wearing long whiskers and an eye-glass, advanced toward him.

"Ah! I am here by appointment," he said, with a drawl.

"Indeed? Wait a moment and I will inquire for a private parlor."

They were soon seated comfortably.

"Now," said the officer from Scotland Yard, "this is my first visit to New York, and as I saw you were a brother officer, I trusted you might excuse the want of formality in my method of introducing myself; I am certain you are a smart fellow, and shall depend upon you for points."

"Certainly," said Blunt, with a laugh; "but I confess you startled me by so quickly piercing through what I considered rather a good make-up; was it so transparent a sham?"

"By no means," replied the Englishman, smiling a little at Blunt's very evident chagrin; "but I am supposed to be the smartest disguise detective on our staff, and that is saying a good deal."

"My name is Blunt," said the New York officer, handing the other his card.

"And mine, Robert Ashton," replied the man from Scotland Yard, returning the compliment.

"I've heard of you."

"Indeed? Well, I'm glad to have met you. Now let me give you an idea of what a difficult case I am engaged on. Six years ago there was stationed in a small town in Surrey a regiment, which we shall call the 16th. One of the officers had for a servant or orderly a man who had formerly deserted from the same regiment, been

caught and punished in the usual manner. The officer, Major Kent, was of a confiding nature, and he firmly believed in this fellow, in spite of his bad record. The orderly, among his other duties, acted as groom in the major's stables. He was a fine-looking fellow, and an excellent horseman. He used to ride out behind the other horses when the major's daughters took a ride, and one day when the youngest girl—a mere child of sixteen—went out alone with the groom he grossly insulted her. She, of course, informed her father, and the fellow knew his doom was sealed. That night, before the major had time to take any proceedings against him—owing to our British love of red tape—he shot his superior dead as he sat in his office, and deserted again."

"But how did they know that the orderly committed the murder?" asked Blunt, whose interest was thoroughly aroused.

"Because he wrote a remarkably good hand, and had the manners of a gentleman, and he left behind him a letter, supposed to have fallen from his pocket, written in his handwriting and addressed to a friend in the west of England."

"Was the letter examined, and the friend questioned?"

"Yes, and no. The letter was read. In it the writer, who went by the name of Lester, declared his intention of deserting again. The friend was not questioned, for the simple reason that he was dead."

"And no steps were taken to trail the man until now?"

"You may well look surprised. Yes, steps were taken, but the military authorities were rather cool over the matter, and Major Kent's family were very poor. They are all dead now except the very daughter whom this murderer insulted, and she has come into a large fortune. She at once employed detectives, and vows she will never rest till her father is avenged."

"Is the man supposed to be in the United States?"

"No; he has been tracked to South America; he was in Buenos Ayres within two years."

"South America?" repeated Blunt.

Again the thought occurred to him that Robert Ashton's quest and his own might lie together!

"Well, my case is a peculiar one, also," said he, slowly; and he then told Ashton his story, suppressing the name of the lady who had engaged his services.

"So your man came to New York from Buenos Ayres?" queried Ashton.

"Yes; at least, so he told his aunt."

"I wonder if he ever met *my* man?" remarked Ashton, musingly.

"Scarcely likely."

"What did you say he was like?"

"A very fair man, golden-haired."

"Hum! Ridiculous ideas occur to the wisest, I believe; when you said the lady suspected him of being an impostor, the thought came into my head that it might be Lester, acting in a new rôle. He has audacity enough for anything."

"But the description does not suit?"

"No, Lester is, or was, dark; if he is still alive it seems scarcely probable that the climate of Buenos Ayres would change him into a blonde."

"No, it does not. I have an appointment at twelve, so I must say farewell. My address is on my card; call and see me; if we are both bound for Southern ports we may as well journey together."

"I should be glad of company, and I shall lose no time in calling."

With a shake of the hand the two detectives parted.

Miss Gordon heard all that Blunt had learned from Mrs. Gould and the old sailor. She drew her pocket-book from her satchel.

"Name the sum that you shall require," she said, impulsively, "for traveling expenses, and start for Panama without delay. Give me a pen and ink and I will write you a check for future use."

CHAPTER X.

SUNDERED LOVERS.

SIGNOR MADURA lost no time in sending for the stranger who seemed to have appeared in his luxurious home in so strange a fashion only to create trouble and disquiet.

The young man appeared with his face flushed and his heart beating wildly.

"Good-morning, signor!" said he, as he entered the private room of the master of the house.

"Good-morning," replied Madura, gravely.

He motioned his guest to a seat.

"I have sent for you to request you to make your stay in my house as brief as possible," he said, in the haughty tones of a noble of Spain.

His visitor's face flushed more deeply than before.

"I shall leave it to-day," he said. "I fear, however, that I must remain forever your debtor, since I am beholden to you for my life, and even for the garments I wear."

"That is nothing," replied the Spaniard, with a wave of his hand. "Signor," he added, as if in apology for having spoken so discourteously, "if I had a daughter I should not so address you."

"You disapprove of my acquaintance with your daughter?"

"I do, most certainly."

"Then, signor, I shall relieve you of my presence, though I must in honor inform you that I love Signorita Mariquita devotedly. I am not what I seem, and I shall return to offer to your daughter my hand and an honorable name."

"What?" exclaimed Madura, starting to his feet with the hot fire of his Spanish blood flashing from his eyes.

"I have said I am not what I seem."

"Enough; be you whom you may, you are no match for my daughter."

As Signor Madura remained standing his guest rose also, and, bowing gravely, was about to leave the room.

"Stay," said the Spaniard, sternly. "You must not leave my house till you give me your word that you will never attempt to hold any communication with my daughter."

"But, signor, if I can prove to you that I am a gentleman by birth and fortune—"

"No more!" cried Madura, interrupting the young man remorselessly. "My daughter shall wed none but a man of her own race and her own church."

"You are cruel," said his guest, bitterly.

"I am just. Will you give me your promise?"

"No."

"Then I have nothing more to say."

"Signor, it pains me to refuse your request, but I cannot in honor make a promise which my heart tells me I should surely break. I must beg you therefore to allow me to depart. I shall require a horse, and must also ask for some information. I know not in what portion of the country I am."

A sudden light lit up the dark face of the Spaniard.

"I shall send my servant to escort you," he said, more cordially than he had yet spoken during the whole interview.

"Can I venture to hope that you will permit me to bid the signorita farewell?"

"No."

Signor Madura's brow had once more grown dark as midnight.

"I bow to your decision, though I consider it an unjust one," said the young man, as he once more turned to leave the room.

This time he was permitted to go, and Signor Madura at once summoned Beppo.

"That man is about to leave here," he said, significantly.

"Yes, signor."

"He knows not where he is; you will be his guide to the home of old Irma."

"Yes, signor."

"Bear this message from me to Irma: This man must be kept a prisoner. He must not be harmed unless he should attempt to escape. He must not escape *alive!* You understand?"

"Yes, signor," replied Beppo, bowing submissively.

Two hours later the young stranger, accompanied by the dwarf, rode away across the boundless expanse of yellow sand.

Mariquita knew nothing of his departure for hours. Late in the afternoon she called for Beppo to perform some trifling service.

"Beppo has gone away with the signor," said the servant who appeared in his stead.

"What signor? Has my father gone out?"

"No, signorita; the stranger signor."

"Where has he gone?" asked the girl, her clear cheek turning pale.

"He has gone away, signorita, to his home, I suppose."

"Very well; let me know when Beppo returns."

She felt deeply wounded. He had gone without a word of farewell. He had spoken no syllable of love; yet Mariquita knew that her passion, so strangely sudden in its birth, was returned. He loved her devotedly.

She sought her father, who sat reading in the cool gallery.

"Padre, mio," she said, softly, laying her hand on his shoulder, "our guest departed very suddenly."

"Yes; he is a worker, and may not linger in idleness."

"But he never said farewell," said the girl, earnestly.

"Ah! that is strange; but what can one expect of a *gaucho* of the *pampa*? He knows nothing of the usages of polite people. For aught we know he may be a criminal—many of those men are."

"Oh, I am certain he is no criminal," protested the girl, warmly, her face flushing indignantly.

"Perhaps not," said her father, with assumed carelessness, returning to his book. As Mariquita turned away he inwardly ejaculated: "I did not dispose of him a moment too soon. This very day I must arrange with Don Pedro to send for Virgil. It is time my daughter was wedded."

CHAPTER XI.

THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSEKEEPER.

MR. LESTER and his youthful bride occupied rooms in a quiet hotel in the upper portion of the city for one week.

Much of the bridegroom's time was taken up in purchasing furniture, etc., for an elegant house on the banks of the Hudson, where he intended to reside with his young wife.

Stella, too, occupied herself in purchasing goods to be made up into dresses and cloaks, and all the other countless articles in which most ladies delight.

She was very happy, though now and then her conscience smote her for her forgetfulness of her father's recent death.

Her husband was all the world to her, and her life, so different from the old one of sordid poverty, seemed like a fairy dream. She offered no remonstrance when Frederic requested her to lay aside her mourning at once.

His wish was law to her, and she only lived in the sunlight of his presence.

Her only care, if such it could be termed, was that he was absent so often.

"When we are in our own home it will be different," she said, hopefully.

They were soon established in their beautiful and luxurious home. Mr. Lester engaged two female servants and a coachman, also a lady to sew for his wife and superintend the house.

He presented Stella with a pretty little carriage and pair of horses, and seemed to take the greatest delight in anticipating her every wish.

He was still absent from his home very frequently, however, and accounted for being so on the plea of business.

The household was agreeable, and Stella had no difficulty in passing her time pleasantly; she discovered that her husband was fond of music, and she secretly engaged a teacher and began to study and practice most industriously.

The only person in the house who did not love Stella was the housekeeper and seamstress. This woman, who was some fifty years of age, was a most peculiar person. She was very tall and thin, and her square face and rugged features gave her a masculine look.

She was exceedingly quiet, but her thin lips were never parted by a smile, and her low-toned voice had a harsh sound even when the words she uttered were pleasant.

This person impressed Stella with an uneasy sense of being constantly under espionage. Just why Mrs. Sutton should watch her she knew not, but she was also fully aware that the lady did so unceasingly.

Under the circumstances the girl began to regard the housekeeper as a *bête noire*, and had she possessed a stronger will she would certainly have made a determined effort to rid herself of a person whose presence was obnoxious to her. She was, however, both good-hearted and weak-minded, or rather wanting in firmness, so she bore with the unpleasant housekeeper's unwelcome presence.

Mr. Lester had not engaged the woman by a personal interview; she had been sent from an intelligence office, and he had never met her face to face until she had been in his house three weeks.

Then they encountered each other upon the stairs. The windows in the hall were stained glass, and the light was dim and uncertain, but both master and servant started violently.

"Excuse me," said Mrs. Sutton, and she passed hastily on with averted face.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Lester, his cheek white and his lips quivering.

From that day the housekeeper's manner grew more strange daily. She began to carry her sewing into Stella's morning-room, where she would take a seat by the window and ply her mistress with questions.

She was not impudent and Stella was too sensitive of the feelings of others to resent what she considered forward conduct on the housekeeper's part; so she replied to her inquiries, though somewhat coldly.

She had to confess that she did not know whether her husband was an Englishman or not. That her acquaintance with him had been very brief prior to their marriage, and much more to the same effect.

Several weeks passed, and Lester was so often absent for days together that Stella began to fear his passion for her had been but a passing fancy, born only to fade and die.

"Your husband's business occupies him very much, Mrs. Lester," said the housekeeper, one morning as she seated herself unbidden by the open window.

"Yes," replied the young wife, biting her lips; for she felt that the woman meant to insinuate that she was neglected.

"In what business is Mr. Lester engaged, may I ask?"

"I don't know."

"Indeed, you are so young that I suppose your husband fancies you do not care for such things."

"I do not understand them." Stella's tone was even colder than usual; she longed for courage to tell this meddlesome woman to leave the room.

Mrs. Sutton seemed to read her thoughts, for she soon after folded up her work, and, murmuring something about duties in the pantry, left Stella to herself.

The grim-faced housekeeper did not retire to the pantry to attend to her duties then. She

proceeded to her own chamber, and after securely locking the door, sat down before a small iron-bound chest. She drew from her bosom a key, which she wore beneath her dress fastened to a long, silver chain which encircled her neck.

With this key she opened the chest. Its contents were somewhat strange.

A uniform—scarlet with yellow facings and tarnished gilt buttons, a number of letters, and a small box. It was the latter article which she sought in trembling haste. She opened it and drew forth a photograph.

The portrait of a young and handsome man in the dress of a British soldier.

On the pictured face the woman gazed with a world of tenderness in her grim face. Her cold gray eyes held a yearning expression that well-nigh softened their steely brightness into beauty.

"Unfortunate being!" she murmured, "sinned against and sinning. Is it possible that I have found him at last?"

With a weary sigh she replaced the picture and drew forth a bundle of letters. They were yellow with age, and the handwriting had grown pale; but her eager eyes followed every line without difficulty. She knew their contents by heart, and the hand that had traced those words was, or had been, dear to her.

"My shoulders have felt the shameful agony of the branding-iron," she read aloud, quoting from the letter, "and I shall avenge myself on the man who gave the order that I should be branded for life."

The housekeeper slowly shook her head.

"Guilty one," she said, in accents of reproach, and yet those accents were blended with the deepest pity. She replaced the letters and uniform and locked the box once more; then, after removing all traces of emotion from her face, for salt tears had forced their way to her stern eyes, she returned to her duties in the household.

CHAPTER XII.

JUPITER'S DISCLOSURE.

WHEN the journey to St. Thomas was accomplished, Blunt knew it was a somewhat hopeless task to inquire at a fever hospital for a patient who had been an inmate of the institution ten years before.

Still, he tried the experiment of consulting the authorities in charge of the fever hospital at St. Thomas, in which he began to believe the real Frederic Cameron Gordon had died, leaving his name and fortune to be assumed by a bold impostor.

He inquired for the head doctor, and found his ignorance of the Spanish tongue rather against him, for the physician could speak little English.

Doctor Queseblo, however, took an interest in the case when he learned that the young sailor who was supposed to have unhappily perished under his care was heir to a large fortune.

"Santa Maria, los Americanos!" he exclaimed, "why will they commit of themselves such foolishness?"

He had been resident-physician when the "Wyoming" made her last trip to St. Thomas, but he had not felt any particular interest in the sick sailors, and he could not remember whether they left the hospital on their feet or in coffins. He promised, however, to look into the matter, and with this promise Blunt was obliged to be content.

Blunt found time hanging rather heavily on his hands during the doctor's investigation, and his friend, the English detective, since their arrival in St. Thomas had been fully occupied in his search for the murderer of Major Kent. During the journey they had become fast friends, and Blunt had learned much from the Scotland Yard officer. He found him a singularly acute and shrewd man, and a very keen observer.

Ashton had one advantage over his associate, he was a thorough master of the French and Spanish languages; so he pursued his inquiries with ease. He was often away from the hotel for hours, and the American detective was thrown on his own resources for occupation and amusement during the period of enforced idleness. Under the circumstances Blunt was glad to find any one who understood English, and he formed the acquaintance of an American from Key West who was in business in St. Thomas. This man was rather a character in his way, and had been a great traveler; among other places he had visited Buenos Ayres, and had been on the *pampa* among the *gauchos*.

He related many interesting stories of these strange beings and their equally strange life; how they roamed hither and thither over the boundless expanse of yellow sand with no companions save the sheep or cattle they guarded, lonely and isolated as sailors upon the ocean.

Blunt became interested in these tales and asked numberless questions of his new acquaintance.

"Such a life might be borne by some men," he said one day, "but I don't believe a Yankee would stand it, especially as you say these men only receive a mere pittance."

"No, I never knew a native of the United

States who was a *gaucho* but one; he was a negro from my own native place, Key West."

"A negro! Why, I should think he would be the last man in the world to fill such a position."

"Well, he only took it up because he was very fond of a man who was a *gaucho*."

Blunt was beginning to tire of the conversation, when his friend suddenly uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it?" asked the detective, as he saw Mr. Norton eagerly beckon to some one outside his store.

"Why, here is the very man I spoke of," he replied, "Jupiter, the negro *gaucho*."

"Indeed!"

The negro entered the store, his black face lit up with smiles, his eyes sparkling with joy.

"Well, Jupiter," said Norton, "I was just this moment speaking of you to this gentleman, who comes from New York: how does it happen that you are so far from the *pampa* and Mass' Gordon?"

"Gordon!"

Blunt was now all attention.

"Well, Mass' Norton, I didn't leave Mass' Gordon; he done lef' me."

"Indeed; how was that?"

"Why, one night I went out to de corral from Buenos Ayres, where they done sent me for fresh provisions, and I bring some New York papers; Mass' Gordon he was a great han' to read de papers, and soon he gun to tell Mass' Allan dat his gran'fadder was dead and lef' him a fortune."

Blunt had to exercise all his powers of self-restraint to maintain his composure.

"So he went away to claim it?"

"Yes, massa; least I guess so."

"Why didn't he take you with him?"

"I dunno; you see, de way he lef' was so cur'us."

"Indeed? How did he leave?"

"He tell Mass' Allan to call him early in de mawnin', and he lowed he had money 'nuff to carry him to New York, where he grandfadder done died."

"Well?"

"Well, we all went to sleep, and in de mawnin' dey was bofe gone 'fore day!"

"So then he took his friend along with him?"

"S'pose so, an' lef' me dar wid de sheep. Can't understand' it nohow."

"Well, no doubt the gentleman was not sorry to step into a fortune and lost no time about going to claim it. You see, sir," added Mr. Norton, "this Mr. Gordon was content to live a *gaucho's* life, and it appears he was a New Yorker."

"So I hear," replied the detective, impatiently. "Go on," he said to the negro, who stared at him in surprise.

"Well, what I can't see t'rough is Mass' Allan gwan too," said Jupiter, and he scratched his woolly head in perplexity.

"Why, no doubt Mr. Gordon took him along for company."

"No, Mass' Norton, he didn't; I hearn Mass' Allan tell Mass' Gordon dat he darsent go out ob de 'Public, 'cause he done something bad in England."

Blunt was now most keenly interested; what if this man Allan was the criminal of whom the English detective was in search? Chance had brought the two detectives together; why should not chance bring the men they sought together also?

With a little skillful questioning Blunt elicited the whole story of the sudden disappearance of both the men on the morning after the arrival of the New York papers, by which Frederic Gordon had learned of the death of his grandfather.

Jupiter also related how his astonishment had been turned into alarm by the fresh *blood-stain* upon the sand of the corral!

"That seems rather suspicious, don't you think?" inquired Norton of Blunt.

The storekeeper had no idea that his new friend was a detective in search of the very man who formed the subject of their conversation.

"Well, I do not know. Might not the *blood-stain* mark the spot where the sheep you say you had for supper was slaughtered?" he asked Jupiter.

"No, massa; de sheep is always killed outside de corral."

"But, if both horses were gone, both men must have gone also."

"Unless one man murdered the other, and turned the horse loose to avert suspicion," suggested Norton.

"I dunno," replied Jupiter, sorrowfully shaking his head. "But I 'fraid dat something cur'us happened dat night."

"Are you idle just now?" asked Blunt of the negro, as he turned to leave the store.

"Yes, massa; I'se lookin' for a job."

"Well, come to the Cosmopolitan Hotel tomorrow afternoon and inquire for Mr. Blunt. I'll find work for you, and if you like, I'll take you to New York with me when I return there."

"Ah! laws, massa," cried Jupiter, in delight.

"Yes. Don't be later than three o'clock."

They parted, the detective being well satisfied with his day's work.

He found the Scotland Yard man waiting for him, and he related the story he had heard from the negro, Jupiter.

Ashton, however, did not lay much stress upon the fact that the man Allan was a fugitive from justice and an Englishman.

"I am working on a clew I've just obtained," he said, when the American detective had finished his story. "To-morrow I'll investigate matters a little further, and to-morrow night I want you to accompany me on board an American vessel, where we can obtain some information and see how I stand."

"Very well," replied Blunt.

He little knew how serious the consequences of his promise were to prove.

Next day he prepared for the visit of the negro Jupiter.

He had received from Miss Gordon a photograph of her nephew—or, more correctly speaking, two photographs. One taker before he left his home—a youthful, happy face, a New York man in good circumstances, elegantly dressed; the other, a recent one of the man of whom Miss Gordon entertained such strong suspicions.

That picture showed what appeared to be the same face, but very much changed; the expression was no longer bright and frank. A certain hardness shone from the eyes and showed itself in the set of the lips, which were so nearly hidden by the full blonde beard. The face was that of a man imbibed by misfortunes and suffering—a man driven to the wall and desperate—a man, as the detective's practiced eye could read, who was capable of anything. Could ten years spent among the yellow sands of the *pampa* work this change in Frederic Gordon?

Jupiter was punctual. He arrived on time, dressed in a fresh white suit of clothes, and smiling all over as he bowed low before his "new massa."

"Sit down, Jupiter," said the detective, kindly.

"Thank you, sir."

After a little conversation to set the man at his ease, Blunt produced the two photographs and placed them before the negro.

"Whose portraits are those?" he asked, calmly.

Jupiter gazed long and earnestly at the first one, and replied, unhesitatingly:

"Dat's Massa Gordon, shuah!"

"And this?" asked Blunt, indicating the latest photograph.

Jupiter took it up and stared at it with a puzzled look; he turned it about and seemed uncertain; at length a new light seemed to dawn upon him.

"It's Mass' Allan, an' his ha'r's turned gray."

A cold chill passed over Blunt.

"You are certain it is not Mr. Gordon?" he asked, quietly.

"Mass' Gordon? Laws, no!"

"Did Mr. Allan look like the other gentleman?"

"No," said Jupiter, promptly.

"But those two pictures look alike."

"Well, dey was 'bout de same size, on'y Mass' Allan had black ha'r, an' Mass' Gordon's ha'r an' beard was yellor as de silk ob de corn."

"But apart from their hair they looked alike?"

"No, dey didn't, nedder. Mass' Allan was cross and sulky-lookin', like he is in his pictur', an' Mass' Gordon was allers a-smilin' an' jokin'. Dat's what makes I can't understand why he gowed off and nebber tell ole Jupe good-by."

Blunt pondered; this negro could easily prove the false Frederic Gordon an impostor; could he also furnish a clew by which the fate of the real Frederic Gordon could be ascertained, and if he had met with foul play help to bring his murderer to justice?

"Jupiter, did you never think that Mr. Gordon was murdered and his body hidden in the sand?" he asked suddenly.

"Glory, no! Who could do dat?"

"The man he regarded as a friend," answered Blunt, solemnly.

Jupiter looked thoroughly frightened.

"But, what for would Mass' Allan do sich ting as dat?" he asked, his big eyes rolling wildly.

"I cannot tell; they may have quarreled during the night after you fell asleep."

"Dunno; dat blood was mighty queer, but if Mass' Allan done dat, what makes dat de horse and saddle was gone?"

"I will get you to guide me to the spot where your corral was that night."

"Golly, massa, how you s'pose I se gwin' to find it? De sand done shift ten times a week. I couldn' fin' dat spot to save my po'r brack soul."

Blunt mused. Here was a fresh difficulty. If the bones of Frederic Cameron Gordon were beneath the sands of the *pampa* they were concealed as effectually as if they had been consigned to the depth of the ocean. He had heard of the *pampers* or sand-storm of the plains, the furious wind of the desert which uplifts the whole surface of the *pampa* and piles mountains of sand where hollows have been, cutting deep valleys

in the level plain and altering the face of nature in a single hour.

Truly it was useless to search for human bones among boundless wastes of sand.

The question was, had Frederic Gordon met his fate in the corral that night? Was it possible the other had murdered him while he slept? That he had perished without one cry for help?

"I must have time to think it all out," said Blunt, to himself; aloud he added: "Consider yourself engaged as my servant; I shall tell you your duties later. I have an engagement, so you can amuse yourself till ten o'clock to-night. Then return here; meanwhile, I shall see the landlord and arrange for your accommodation. Good-night."

Jupiter bowed and withdrew, and the detective remained lost in thought till Ashton's voice roused him.

"Come," he said, gayly, "you have not forgotten that you go with me on board the *Celia*, have you?"

"No," responded Blunt, briefly; "I am ready."

"You seem preoccupied," remarked Ashton, as they left the hotel; "have you learned anything of importance from your sable friend?"

The American detective related what had taken place during his interview with Jupiter.

"By Jove! that does look as if your lady client was right in her conjectures," exclaimed Ashton.

"I fear she is. It would evidently be an easy matter to convict this man Allan of being an impostor, but Miss Gordon will not be satisfied with that alone. She also wishes to learn her nephew's fate, and if possible bring his murderer to justice."

"Well, you see, we have no evidence that there has been a murder."

"We have. This man is in possession of Gordon's papers. He heard his story from his own lips, as the negro can testify. Do you suppose that the man would part with the evidence of his identity without a struggle? My idea is that he was murdered in his sleep by his treacherous companion, who was probably aware of what escaped the negro's notice, namely—the startling resemblance between himself and Gordon."

"You are right, I suppose. Did you say this Allan was dark originally?"

"Yes."

"Can it be possible that he is Lester, the murderer of Major Kent?"

"I cannot tell. You have no photograph of him, I suppose?"

"No; there is none in existence that I ever heard of."

"That is unfortunate; how can you be expected to recognize him?"

"By the mark that no art can efface, the letter *D* branded between his shoulders. He is a marked man *for life*."

"True; I had forgotten. May I ask why you pay this visit to-night?"

"Certainly; I have tracked Lester to this vessel, in which he took passage. I now wish to ascertain at what port he left her."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DETECTIVES CAUGHT.

WHEN the two detectives were seated in the cabin of the *Celia*, Blunt made an unpleasant discovery. The captain was a man who had served a term in State's prison for manslaughter, having killed one of his crew at sea, and Blunt's evidence had convicted him of the crime, or rather, the detective's efforts had brought him to justice and obtained the evidence which sent him to prison, and almost to the gallows.

He was an ill-shaped, evil-faced ruffian, with beetling brows and coarse red hair and beard; his small eyes were full of malice, and his broad, flat nose betokened obstinacy.

If he recognized the detective he made no sign, but welcomed the two officers with great apparent cordiality. His mate, who looked a fitting companion for himself, assisted him to set out glasses, hot water and spirits, and the whole party sat down to what the evil-faced captain termed a "social glass."

Blunt was rather silent, but the Scotland Yard detective asked a flood of questions about the passenger the captain had carried to some unknown port. After answering many of them in a seemingly careless manner, the captain's temper appeared to suddenly change.

"What do you want with this man, mate?" he asked, roughly, and Blunt observed a meaning glance pass between him and the mate.

"Well," replied Ashton, with a laugh, "I might want him because he was heir to a title, but, as it happens, I don't."

"You might want him because you are a cursed bloodhound!" said the captain, fiercely.

"What do you mean?"

Ashton sprung to his feet, but he was seized from behind his back and his arms pinioned before he had time to make a move. At the same moment Blunt was felled upon the cabin floor by a blow on the head.

Both men had been sitting with their backs to the companionway, and their assailants crept upon them noiselessly.

"How dare you assault my friend?" exclaimed

Ashton, his eyes flashing as he turned and faced two men who had quietly entered the cabin.

"Go slow, Mr. Bloodhound!" said the captain, whose name was Mitchell, with a sneer. "I've got a grudge against your friend; but, so far, I ain't got any against you. We are going to sea now, and I'll land you at La Guayra, the first port I make, if you'll promise to keep your mouth shut. As for him, I have not made up my mind what I'll do with him. I'm bound to get square, you can take your oath."

"What grudge have you got against my friend?" asked Ashton, pale as death, for he began to realize the terrible position they were in, and he felt an additional pang when he reflected that he had been the means of exposing his friend to danger, perhaps to death, for the captain and his crew looked as if murder was an every-day occurrence with them.

"Only seven years in State's prison, that's all," replied the other, with a brutal laugh.

"You would not have gone there if you had not deserved it," averred the English detective, boldly.

"You had better keep a civil tongue in your head," warned the captain, with an oath. He then made a sign to his men, who raised the unconscious detective and carried him away.

The anchor had been weighed while they talked, and the vessel was soon at sea. Ashton had tried to go on deck, but found he was tied fast to an iron ring in the locker on which he had been sitting. He knew resistance was useless, so he remained quiet. The captain went on deck, and the mate followed him, leaving Ashton alone to reflect upon his folly in exposing himself and his friend to such danger.

The delay in prosecuting their investigations was exasperating enough, but Ashton was well aware that dark deeds can be done in the portion of the globe they were in without much danger to the men who commit them.

No one had been informed of their intention of visiting the *Celia*, no one saw them board the ship, for the pier was deserted at that hour by all save a negro watchman, who was coiled up, fast asleep, on a rug, as they passed him by.

If Captain Mitchell saw fit, he could toss them both over the ship's side when they were out at sea, and not a soul would be the wiser.

Ashton's reflections were very bitter, as he stood with his arms tightly pinioned behind him, and tied fast to the locker. His most painful thought was that Blunt was in far greater danger than himself.

He knew not to what lengths this murderous wretch might go, to—as he termed it—"get square" with the man who had been the means of bringing him to justice for some former crime.

While Ashton stood thus in enforced idleness, bitterly reflecting on his own rash conduct which had brought about such dire results, he heard a step behind him, and glancing around he saw the captain descending the companionway.

"Well," said that worthy, "I guess I can cast you loose now."

He cut the ropes that held Ashton's wrists and signed to him to be seated.

"We'll have a glass of grog," he said; "and I'll tell you why I've got such a spite against that cursed detective."

The English officer longed to lay the brutal ruffian upon his own cabin floor senseless, as poor Blunt had been half an hour before; but he knew that he would only incur fresh danger by obeying the natural impulse, so he took a seat and prepared to listen to what the scoundrel had to say.

"I suppose you think me a regular tough?" inquired Mitchell, pouring out a glass of raw spirits and drinking it down.

"I don't understand your conduct. You invited me on board in a friendly manner, and the result is I am at sea, a prisoner, to the injury of my business; my friend has been brutally assaulted—and I cannot understand the affair."

"Well, listen. But first, what business do you follow?"

"I am a lawyer."

"What are you doing in these parts?"

"A man has laid claim to a fortune, and we think he is an impostor. We are in search of the real heir."

"Are you sure that's all?"

"Certainly I am."

"Well, when I saw that bloodhound, I thought you was another like him, trailing some poor devil, so I thought I'd take you to sea."

"What port are you bound for?"

"Liverpool, England."

"Then we may expect to be detained from our business for months."

"You needn't."

The captain spoke very significantly.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, I'll put you ashore at La Guayra if you promise you won't say anything."

"And my friend?"

A scowl of black malignity settled over the brutal face of the sailor.

"I swore I'd get square with him ten years ago, and I'll do it," he said, with a terrible oath, bringing his huge fist down on the table.

with a blow that made the glasses dance. "I never expected to get such a good chance; but I've got it, and I sha'n't let it slip, you can take your oath."

"So that is your determination, is it?" asked Ashton, calmly.

"It is," he answered, doggedly.

CHAPTER XIV. VENGEANCE.

In a pleasant morning-room in a very fine old country seat in Devonshire, near Barnstable, two ladies sat engaged in conversation. One was elderly, white-haired, and beautiful with the matchless beauty of well-preserved age. A lady whose skin was clear and soft as a baby's, whose blue eyes were bright and full, and whose snowy hair formed a proper setting for so fair a face. An aristocratic old lady, whose figure was upright as a dart, and whose hands were models of symmetry.

The other was a dark-browed girl of twenty-two years, with a handsome face and resolute gray eyes. She was not beautiful, for her lips were too firm and her chin too square for feminine loveliness, but she looked full of energy and determination. The daughter of a race of soldiers, Gertrude Kent was as fearless as she was frank and candid.

"How terribly tiresome it is to wait," she said, impatiently, pacing up and down the pretty room, and now and then casting a discontented glance out of the windows on the fair landscape, which should have excited her admiration.

"Gertrude, my dear," said the other lady, mildly, "don't you think time would pass more quickly if you occupied yourself?"

"With lace-work?" inquired the girl, with contempt.

"Or any other work," replied the other lady, not noticing the slur cast on the delicate cobweb in her white hands.

"Flannel petticoats for the poor? No, thank you, Lady Grafton, I have no designs on the rector."

"You have no thoughts save those of vengeance," sighed Lady Grafton.

"You are right. While my father's blood cries out I shall never rest."

"Oh, Gertrude, my dear, such feelings are not only unwomanly, they are unchristian."

The girl did not answer: she clinched her long, shapely brown hands as if she had been smitten by a sudden pang.

"It is useless to argue with me, aunt Mabel," she said, after a long pause; "nothing can change me, nothing shake my resolution to hunt down my father's murderer."

"I know it, dear; but I do think you should try and enjoy your fortune after enduring the tiresome life you led as a governess."

"I shall enjoy it afterward. Do you know, aunt Mabel, that I am half-inclined to go to New York?"

"Nonsense, dear; what good could that do?"

"I cannot tell. I sometimes fancy that I am fated to be the one who will discover that vile murderer."

"You are foolish to cherish such a thought. The detective who went to America was—as you were repeatedly assured—the very best man for such a mission."

"Perhaps so, but it seems such a weary time to wait; he wrote me that he leaves for St. Thomas, and I cannot expect to hear again for ages."

"Be contented, dear; do try to be contented."

Such easy advice to give, but such difficult advice to take. Before Gertrude had time to utter the impatient answer which trembled on her lips, the door opened and the footman announced "Mr. Seymour."

A tall, well-made man of some thirty-five years entered the room, and was warmly greeted by the young mistress of Lethridge Hall and her aunt.

"I have news for you, Miss Kent," he said, as soon as he was seated.

"Indeed?"

"News that will insure a welcome. I have heard the early history of the man you sent me to inquire about, and secured his photograph."

"You don't say so?" cried Gertrude, eagerly.

"Yes, I secured it, though I had to use strategy and diplomacy, for I had to induce no less a person than his wife to give it to me."

"He has a wife?"

"Yes; he deserted her many years ago."

"Of course."

"He is a younger son of a noble family of Scottish origin; he was educated at Cambridge, and offending his uncle, whose heir he expected to be, in a fit of anger he enlisted and married beneath him. He then deserted, as you know; your father happened to be the officer in command when he was punished, and he vowed vengeance against him."

"And carried out his scheme by pretending great penitence."

"Exactly. It appears that he has an elder sister, who is perfectly devoted to him; she furnished him with the means of escape. He has, however, no gratitude, and this woman has been visiting his wife in search of information as

to his whereabouts, trying to ascertain whether he is dead or alive, as he has never written her one word."

"There!" exclaimed Gertrude, "and yet people tell one that no person is wholly bad."

"Well, I confess I fail to find one good trait in this man's character."

"By the by, did you learn his real name?"

"Yes, his real name is Gordon."

"A good name, terribly disgraced by a bad man," said Lady Grafton.

"But the picture; let me see it."

Gertrude stretched out her hand and Mr. Seymour placed a photograph in it, the picture of a handsome young man in the cap and gown of a university student.

"Brought up a gentleman, and he sunk so low!" murmured the girl as she gazed on the pictured face before her.

"He had a bad nature, passionate and revengeful," said Mr. Seymour.

Gertrude remained lost in thought. A few minutes later Lady Grafton was called from the room to a consultation with the housekeeper on some knotty question.

"Mr. Seymour," said Gertrude, suddenly, "you have done so much for me, have proved yourself my friend so thoroughly, and besides have found out so much that seemed forever hidden in mystery, that I am trying to gather courage to make a bold request."

"And that request you may consider granted," said the gentleman, rising and standing near her, his earnest face glowing, his dark eyes full of interest.

"It is this. Will you go to America and find the murderer of my father? I have more confidence in your ability to do it than I have in the whole force of Scotland Yard."

"My dear Miss Kent," began Seymour.

"Wait!" cried the girl, interrupting him and standing with uplifted hand, "I know I am trespassing upon your friendship, but I feel that you alone can accomplish this work."

"I shall try," he said, gravely.

"And you will succeed," she answered, her brown cheeks flushing and tears in her resolute eyes.

"If I do, may I claim my reward when I return to England?" he asked, his eyes grown very tender.

"What reward can I offer you?" she said, but her hot cheeks and averted gaze betrayed the fact that she well knew.

He raised the shapely brown hand that hung by her side to his lips.

"Yes," she whispered, as Lady Grafton returned.

"Then, ladies, it is adieu; I start for New York to-morrow," said Mr. Seymour, and with a bow he was gone.

CHAPTER XV. A PRISONER.

MARIQUITA's lover was too much oppressed by varied emotions to heed ordinary things, and he blindly followed Beppo's lead after leaving the house that held all that was dear to him.

He was tempted to despair when he reflected on Signor Madura's parting words, for he well knew the pride and obstinacy of the Spanish nature.

Beppo was silent and his companion was glad that the dwarf did not feel disposed to be loquacious, for under such circumstances he felt that it would require a powerful effort on his part to find conversation for even a negro.

They journeyed on till nightfall, when they came in sight of a cluster of huts sheltered by trees.

"There must be water here!" exclaimed the white man in surprise.

"Si, Signor, we sleep here to-night and go on to-morrow."

They alighted and were received by an aged negress. Her hair was white as lamb's-wool, and her face was one mass of wrinkles; but her eyes were full of fire, and her form upright.

"Come in," said she, leading the way to the largest of the houses, and the weary traveler found himself in a cool room, which was clean and neat, though almost bare of furniture.

He was left alone for a few moments, then the woman returned, while Beppo attended to the wants of the horses.

"You are hungry?" said the woman.

"Very, and thirsty."

"The *yerba* is ready, and I will spread a couch for you to sleep."

"Thank you. Call me early to-morrow; I wish to leave this part of the world as soon as possible. How far am I from Buenos Ayres?"

The old woman made no reply to the question, and the tired man thought she had not heard it. Irma, for that was her name, prepared a tempting supper, and he ate heartily, swallowing large draughts of the fragrant tea.

Meanwhile his couch was prepared, and throwing himself upon it he sunk into a profound slumber.

He slept far into the following day, and when he opened his heavy eyelids the hot sun was streaming down in his midday strength.

"Good heavens!" he exclaimed. "They have allowed me to sleep till noon!"

He sprung up and hastily arranged his dress.

He was about to seek Beppo, when the old woman knocked at the door.

"Come in!" he said, impatiently.

"What can I get you for breakfast, signor?" she asked, calmly.

"Anything—nothing; did I not tell you to call me early? Where is Beppo?"

"Beppo left at sunrise."

"Left! Then who will escort me to the city?"

"I am sorry, signor, but I have my orders. Signor Madura says you must not leave here."

"What?"

"It is true, signor. I am indebted to the signor for more than life, and I must obey him."

The old woman's tone was very resolute, and she looked the picture of dignified determination.

"But this is an outrage," exclaimed the man, indignantly.

"I cannot help it. I am Irma, the mother of escaped slaves. Many years ago I escaped from Brazil; Signor Madura saved me, and I am bound to him and his for life. He is the friend of the blacks and they all obey him. Until I receive different orders you must remain here, where I shall make you as comfortable as I can."

"And is it possible that I am to be kept here a prisoner?"

"Those are my orders."

"I shall not stay. Guide or no guide, I leave this place at once."

"You cannot, for Beppo has taken the horse away with him."

"But this is infamous! I do not wish to return to Signor Madura's house, or hold any communication with any of its inmates. I wish to go to New York."

"I cannot help it; I have my orders."

He saw it was useless to argue with the old woman, so he walked out into the open air, for his head was in a whirl. Several negro men were lounging about, having for companions huge dogs, but there were no horses in the encampment or village so far as he could see. A spring flowed in the center of the cluster of huts, and the shade of the trees was grateful; but on every side stretched the boundless sand of the *pampa*, and the angry man well knew it was madness to attempt to leave his place of shelter alone on foot.

Signor Madura had triumphed, and he reflected that the Spaniard would justify the course he had pursued by reminding him, should they ever meet, that he had refused to give his word that he would not seek his daughter's presence.

"I must endeavor to bribe one of these men to carry a letter for me," he said, moodily; "but how can I when I am penniless? How did this all happen? My senses are coming back by degrees. I remember the sheep roasting on the crane made of the bars of the corral, and I remember being bound on the horse, though not so clearly. How did it happen? The papers the negro brought—But what became of Allan and the corral? What became of my letters and papers, my money? Am I dazed, or mad?"

Signor Madura had indeed triumphed; the man he dreaded was a prisoner.

CHAPTER XVI.

SANDY MCBEAN—CAUGHT IN THE ACT.

ASHTON had no hope left; probably the captain of the Celia might be induced to forego his scheme of revenge if he was well paid to be merciful.

"Sit down and let us make a night of it," said the sailor, and, willing to humor him as far as possible, Ashton took a seat and accepted the glass of spirits and water which the burly ruffian had mixed for him.

"That fellow is the worst bloodhound in New York," said Mitchell, with an oath; indeed he rarely uttered a sentence that was not garnished with one.

"I employed him to assist me in finding an heir to a fortune in New York which an imposter has possession of for the time being," replied Ashton, carelessly.

"A fortune did ye say, mate?" asked the captain, his small, ferret-like eyes twinkling.

"Yes, a fortune of sixteen million dollars."

"Great Scot! sixteen million; and here have I been a-slavin' all my days and ain't worth that many thousands."

"Well, my reward is so big that I expect to retire from business as soon as I earn it," said Ashton, coolly lighting a cigar and passing one to his host!

"Heh! Well, some has luck an' some hasn't. Did you find the feller?"

"No, I thought you could give me some information, for which of course I was prepared to pay handsomely, as I was instructed to spare no expense; but you've done the thing up brown! I relied on Blunt because he was recommended to me as the smartest man in New York."

"Yes, darn him, a sight too smart," growled the captain, concocting another stiff glass of grog.

His face had brightened when the detective spoke of paying him, but it grew dark again when he alluded to Blunt.

"Well, you see, all these things are matters of business to these fellows," Ashton remarked, loftily, as if detectives were beneath contempt.

"Yes, and a blooming mean business, a-huntin' and houndin' a man down for somethin' or other he's forgot all about."

"I can't say I have a very high opinion of the profession," said Ashton, shrugging his shoulders, "but you see these men are necessary evils. I can't earn my reward without Blunt."

Captain Mitchell reflected as he sipped his grog. He was desperately avaricious. Ashton had guessed that from his small, cunning, green eyes and greedy-looking mouth; but he was also revengeful. He longed to handle the money he heard of with such eager ears, but he hated the thought of letting the detective slip through his fingers.

"I s'pose you carry lots of brass about with you?" he remarked, with a clumsy attempt at carelessness.

"Yes, and no. I have plenty of money at the hotel, and to my credit at the British bank at St. Thomas, but I never carry money on my person."

The sailor gave a grunt of disgust. If the detective had acknowledged that he had any considerable sum in his pocket he would not have felt the slightest compunctions in robbing him, and then pitching him overboard in company with his friend.

At this moment an interruption occurred in the form of a short, thickset man, who entered the cabin and said:

"Ye'r wanted on deck, cappin'."

The captain hastened away, and the man turned to Ashton and said hurriedly:

"Luk oot for yon devel, mester; I'm sare afraid he'll be at same develishness wi' yon puir mon."

"Can't you help us?" asked Ashton, for he saw that the Scotchman was honest and well-intentioned.

"I dinna ken; I'll try. I only cam' an the ship to-day, an' little did I ken what far cappin' she had."

"If you save my friend you shall be well rewarded."

"Hoots, mon! I'm no thinkin' o' rewards."

"Do your best, for God's sake!" whispered Ashton, for he heard the heavy step of the captain, who returned and seated himself, scowling at the Scottish sailor as he did so.

"Well, it is a hard life you lead," said Ashton, with great apparent sympathy.

"It's a dog's life," replied the captain, emphasizing the remark in his usual manner.

"Do you know what I think?" remarked the detective.

"No."

"Well, you may as well chip in with me; we'll get Blunt to find our man, and then get rid of him and pocket his share of the reward."

The captain's small eyes sparkled with a mixture of greed, suspicion and cunning.

"How do I know that you ain't giving me guff?" he inquired, roughly.

"Well, you will have to take my word for it," responded the detective, in a calm, even tone.

"I don't know you from a side of sole-leather, why should I take your word?"

Ashton shrugged his shoulders.

"If you don't take it you can leave it," he said, helping himself to a glass of water.

"Of course I don't say you ain't telling Gospel truth, mate," remarked the sailor, apologetically.

"That's as you please. I do not think it would be worth my while to lie to you under the circumstances."

"No, it wouldn't, that's a fact, but I can't let that Blunt off. It would kill me if he slipped through my fingers now."

"Revenge is sweet," they say," said Ashton, with a yawn of indifference, "but I've found hard cash a great deal sweeter."

The greedy little eyes glowed and the captain licked his lips.

"If a man could only have both!" he exclaimed, enthusiastically.

"And I was endeavoring to show you how to get both, but you refuse to listen to me."

"I'll listen. Go ahead."

"Then you must bring this man Blunt out here, and we'll make a bargain with him; put back to St. Thomas, and when we find our man we can get rid of Blunt, and you shall have his share of the reward."

The captain hesitated. This did sound promising, but he still entertained a doubt as to whether Ashton was acting with good faith toward him.

"That sounds mighty fine," he said, slowly; "but how do I know that you and Blunt won't inform the police on me the moment I land you?"

"As I said before, you will have to take my word for it."

"Well, I ain't goin' to put back to St. Thomas on no sich wild-goose chase. We'll see what we'll do when we git to La Guayra."

"Very good," said Ashton, coldly. He saw that the captain was drinking himself into a state of brutal obstinacy, and thought it better to argue with him no further.

"I shall smoke a cigar on deck, if you have no objections," he said, rising.

"Go ahead; I don't care," was the surly reply.

On deck Ashton hoped he might see the Scotchman, the only man on board on whom he could depend. He was not disappointed.

"Eh? Sir, dive ye want till hear about yer fr'en?" he whispered, as he cautiously approached the detective.

"Yes, indeed," replied Ashton, eagerly.

"I untied his han's, and he's weel arm't wi' a gude revolver."

"That's well; I was afraid they would take it from him."

"An' so they did, the mean hounds; but Sandy McBean was weel able till gi' it back till him."

"Thank you, Sandy; I'll not forget it to you."

"That's aw richt; when we reach La Guayra I'll fleet awa; I'll no bide an no seek sheep as you."

"Well, Sandy, I depend on you," said Ashton, and the Scotchman hastened away just in time to avoid the captain, who now made his appearance on deck.

It was a dark night, with only an occasional gleam of moonlight between the clouds, but the sea where the vessel cleft her way through its calm surface was a mass of phosphorescent fire.

Ashton stayed on deck all night, and at daylight went below. The captain lay slumbering heavily.

The detective took a rapid survey of the cabin; on every side there were small lockers or closets, every inch of space being utilized, as is the custom on shipboard.

On the door of one locker was inscribed the word "Medicines."

Ashton glanced at the sailor; he was in a deep sleep, induced by his liberal potations.

The detective drew a bunch of keys from his pocket, and after several trials, succeeded in opening the closet door. It was stocked with drugs in small quantities.

In an instant a four-ounce bottle marked "Laudanum" was in his pocket.

As he closed the closet and was about to lock it the cabin door opened, and he found he was not alone with the slumbering captain.

"Caught, by Jove!" he said to himself, and turned to face the intruder.

CHAPTER XVII.

MISS GORDON TURNS DETECTIVE.

FROM the time Ben Blunt left New York Miss Gordon began to enact the rôle of detective herself.

That is to say, she began to watch her nephew very closely. She partly laid aside her mourning and accompanied him into society, and she observed that he felt her presence irksome and restraining. Day by day the impression grew stronger in the lady's mind that the man who had assumed her beloved nephew's place was an impostor.

She had loved her "dear boy," as she still fondly termed him, with all her heart, she had always felt toward him as if he had been her own son; but her heart had never warmed to the stranger who had come forward to claim his name and fortune.

The time seemed desperately long to the anxious woman when the detective was in South America, and she longed to hear from him with almost feverish impatience. Days passed into weeks, however, and no word came. "What in the world is he about?" she said to herself, for she had no confidante. Mrs. Gould, of course, knew something of her doubts, but they were not congenial and the two ladies rarely met; indeed, Miss Gordon, with that absence of logic peculiar to her sex, could never quite forgive Mrs. Gould for being the cause of her nephew's exile.

Some four weeks after Blunt's departure for St. Thomas, Miss Gordon, in company with her nephew, attended a large reception given by one of the leaders of society in New York. They were late, and the parlors were crowded when they arrived. It was, in fact, a fashionable crush.

Miss Gordon was soon surrounded by old friends who welcomed her warmly, for she was a favorite.

"Quite a lion show," said a lady, who was more remarkable for her sharp sayings than her amiability.

"Indeed? Who are the lions?" asked a rosy-cheeked *débutante*.

"There is one of them! an Englishman, Mr. Seymour."

"Ah! He is fine-looking."

Mr. Seymour was standing near the group of ladies and Miss Gordon felt interested in him. He was handsome, rather above the average of drawing-room exquisites; tall—six feet two, and well proportioned, dark-haired, and aristocratic, indeed the very man who had won Gertrude Kent's affections by his manliness and intelligence. Later in the evening Mr. Seymour and Miss Gordon were introduced to each other, and the impression he had already made on the old lady was deepened by his conversation.

She cordially invited him to call and see her,

and he accepted the invitation as if he was glad it had been extended to him.

"Who was that gentleman in whom you seemed so interested, aunt Lucille?" asked her nephew, as soon as they were seated in the carriage.

"A Mr. Seymour, an Englishman," she replied, in the cold tone she always used in addressing Frederic Gordon.

"Did I hear you invite him to luncheon?" he asked, with seeming indifference.

"Yes."

He did not answer, but his aunt fancied that he was annoyed.

Two days after Mr. Seymour made his appearance, and was presented to Mr. Gordon, who welcomed him very cordially.

"Where did I see that man before?" the Englishman asked himself, as he sat at the luncheon-table studying the face of his host.

"You are English, are you not?" he said, aloud, addressing Mr. Gordon.

"No, certainly not. I was born and brought up in New York, and have never been in England in my life." It was quite evident that the gentleman felt annoyed by the question.

"Your accent is decidedly English."

"Just what I have always remarked," said Miss Gordon, as she helped her guest to strawberries and cream.

"My greatest chum was an Englishman," said the master of the house, abruptly, as if he wished the discussion to drop, and soon after he excused himself and left the table.

"Your nephew's face is perfectly familiar to me, Miss Gordon, and still I cannot place him to save my life," said Mr. Seymour.

"Have you ever visited South America?"

"Never."

"He spent ten years there."

"Indeed; I am interested in that country, and may have to visit it. I am engaged in amateur detective work."

"Indeed?"

Without intending to do so, Frank Seymour related the story of the murder of Major Kent, and his daughter's determination to avenge her father's death and bring his murderer to justice.

"What a grand girl!" exclaimed Miss Gordon, her color rising and her eyes sparkling.

"I think so," assented Seymour, quietly. "She is my promised wife," he added.

"I congratulate you. Come, let us go to the parlor, and tell me more about her."

She felt tempted to relate her story, but reflected that it would be scarcely prudent to do so till she was better acquainted with her guest.

He spent a pleasant hour, and left the house with a warm invitation to return at an early day.

"I don't like the nephew; he looks like a man with an unpleasant history," thought Seymour, as he walked away from the house.

"If that man goes to South America I'll tell him to look for Fred," decided Miss Gordon; "he found out more than the detectives did in England, why should not he find out more here? The man he is in search of was last heard of in Buenos Ayres, and the man I suspect came from there. While he is trailing the one he may accidentally come across the track of the other."

How little did she know the truth!

Frederic Gordon was more disturbed over the visit of the strange Englishman than seemed reasonable. He left the house, and proceeding to a livery stable, hired a buggy and drove rapidly out of town.

His face wore a scowl, and his cigar was allowed to go out so often that at length he threw it away with an oath.

"I'm as nervous as an old woman," he said, impatiently. "Why should I care if she became acquainted with every cursed Englishman that ever left England?"

Still he did care—nay, more, he trembled as if struck with ague. What was it that he dreaded? What danger stared him in the face?

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOPE FOR THE CAPTIVE.

SIGNOR MADURA lost no time in summoning his friend Don Pedro to his house. Don Pedro de Carrara was like himself, a Spaniard, a member of an old Spanish family whose pride was only exceeded by their poverty. His only son was a young man of twenty-four, and the fathers had long ago decided that the young people were intended by kind Providence to unite the two old Castilian houses.

Signor Madura's family had promised that in the event of his daughter marrying a Spaniard of noble birth, they would overlook the past and receive her as one of them.

Virgilo was a gay, careless man, who did not bestow one thought on the girl he had promised through his father to marry, and Mariquita had never met her intended husband, and, indeed, was not aware that the arrangement had been made.

Two weeks had elapsed since the stranger who won her young heart had left so abruptly. She could learn nothing of him from Beppo, whose lips were closed by the orders of his master.

He told her, however, that he escorted the young man to Buenos Ayres and left him there with a party of *gauchos*, his friends.

This news saddened the young girl more than ever; so he was but a rude herdsmen, as her father said. Somehow, she had hoped for something better; she felt that he was superior to any one she had ever met; she loved him with all the fire and passion of her race and clime, but a *gaucho*!

Why was he not a gentleman? A hero, such as she read of in poems and romances?

He had appeared in her quiet home in such a romantic fashion that she felt half-disposed to love him before his eyes had looked into hers.

Now all seemed changed, commonplace and disappointing. Her father's opposition could never kill her love for the unknown stranger, but contempt is fatal to romance, and Mariquita was dangerously near despising the handsome *gaucho*.

Fortunately for him—the absent lover—unfortunately for Signor Madura, another romantic heart throbbed under the same roof with that of his lovely daughter.

This heart was that of Mariquita's maid, Juanita, a quadroon girl of some education and great beauty. Her mother had once been a slave in Brazil, and had lived and died in the household of Madura.

Juanita had a lover, and he was an inmate of old Irma's village—one of her band of fugitives. Of course he visited his fair one whenever he found an opportunity, and such an opportunity presented itself when Beppo returned to the house of Signor Madura, after escorting Mariquita's lover to Irma's village home.

Mona rode the horse which the stranger had used, and he arrived at Signor Madura's house in the evening, accompanied, of course, by the dwarf.

As visitors to the negro quarters were every day received hospitably by the servants, no attention was paid to the fact that Juanita's lover was staying with an old negro from Brazil with whom he had been acquainted when both were slaves.

Juanita dearly loved her youthful mistress and shrewdly guessed that the lady's melancholy had some connection with the abrupt departure of the handsome stranger. Of course the girl sympathized thoroughly with Mariquita. She learned from Meena that the stranger was a prisoner in Irma's village by the orders of Madura.

That night, as Juanita brushed out the long, glossy hair of Mariquita, she began a conversation on the subject of the hardships which beset girls with rich fathers and poor but deserving lovers.

Mariquita listened, at first languidly, then with dawning interest, as Juanita related the history of one oppressed maiden after the other.

"And the best of fathers, even such as signor himself, will send away lovers from their daughters and break the poor young men's hearts," said the maid, as she skillfully braided the silky locks of her young mistress.

"Ah! my father would never be so cruel," murmured Mariquita, while the rich color on her cheeks deepened.

"Ah! you little know—" replied the girl, hesitatingly.

"Know what?"

Suddenly the thought of her lover's hurried departure sprung to Mariquita's mind. Her suspicions were aroused. What if he had been driven away from her without one word in farewell?

"Tell me what you mean, Juanita," she said, almost sternly.

"I dare not," cried the startled maid. "I fear the signor."

"Fear nothing; I shall not betray you. Tell me where the strange signor is, if you know."

"He is a prisoner at old Irma's," said Juanita, in a frightened whisper.

"He did not go away willingly?"

"Yes, signorita, for he thought he was going to *Buenos Ayres*, but he was led to Irma's by Beppo, and the old woman has given orders that he is to be shot like a dog if he tries to escape."

"Santa Anna!" exclaimed Mariquita, pale to the lips.

"Yes; and it is all because he told the signor that he loved his daughter so madly," said Juanita, the last portion of her information being mere guess-work.

"Oh, Juanita, what shall I do?" cried Mariquita, the dreadful thought of her lover's danger banishing her maidenly blushes for the moment.

"Write a letter and Mona shall deliver it. Tell him to be patient and that you return his love," suggested Juanita, who was of a broad and candid nature.

"I shall warn him to be patient," murmured the girl, "but when can Mona return to the village?"

"This very night, and he shall bring you an answer. Stay, there is no paper at old Irma's, no pens, no ink. Send him some."

Mariquita delayed not a moment; she hastily penned a note, which, though she did not express her feelings quite so plainly as Juanita advised, still proved that she was warmly interested in the young man whose misfortunes had been so great.

"Send Mona at once, and for the love of Heaven—

en let him be careful; should Irma suspect that I have sent this letter she would betray me to my father, and kind though he is, I believe he would kill me."

"Mona is silent as the grave," said Juanita, solemnly.

"Then here is the letter," replied Mariquita, handing it to her and hastily tying up a quantity of paper, pens, ink and envelopes. She added a ten-dollar gold-piece to the letter she had placed in Juanita's hand, saying:

"Give that to Mona and tell him to be faithful."

"Oh, my mistress, do you think that he needs money to render him so?" asked Juanita, looking deeply wounded.

"No, but, Juanita, you know that money is always necessary for us; do not be angry, go send away Mona and then return."

In less than five minutes the young girl heard the sound of a horse's gallop as her messenger rode out of the yard.

Juanita returned and the two retired, for the servant always slept on a mattress at the foot of her mistress's bed.

Of course they did not sleep for hours, but talked together on the subject of the handsome stranger who had appeared so suddenly and in such a romantic manner.

"I shall never allow Beppo to wait upon me again," said Mariquita, indignantly; "to think how he deceived me by saying he escorted the signor to the city, and parted from him when he was with his friends."

"Yes, but you must not allow him to think that you are angry, or he will at once suspect that Mona has revealed the truth," replied her maid, who was now versed in worldly wisdom.

Much conversation followed, until Mariquita fell asleep to dream of her lover, who was kept a prisoner for her sweet sake.

Meanwhile Mona was speeding over the *pampa* by the vivid light of the tropic moon, bearing a message of hope to the captive.

CHAPTER XIX.

REVEALED IN A DREAM—THE WIFE'S DISCOVERY.

THE mysterious housekeeper became every day more obnoxious to the youthful mistress of the pretty home on the Hudson. She questioned Stella continually about her husband, till the girl's patience was exhausted and she sharply rebuked the woman's forwardness.

To her surprise Mrs. Sutton meekly apologized and begged forgiveness so humbly that Stella's kind heart was touched.

"The reason I take so much interest in your husband, Mrs. Lester," she said, "is because he so closely resembles a dear friend of mine that I lost many years ago. If Mr. Lester's hair was dark, I should be willing to take my oath that he was the same man, but your husband is a decided blonde."

Stella was startled. She had never felt quite satisfied with her husband's explanation of the fact that his hair and beard were black when she first saw him. His story was that he had disguised himself in order that he might not be recognized in such a low neighborhood, and Stella had felt that the reason was insufficient, artless though she was.

The housekeeper's sharp gray eyes were on her face, and she observed the confusion plainly written there.

"Ladies nowadays bleach their hair," she said, slowly, "but I never heard of a man doing so."

"Of course not," replied Stella, sharply.

Somehow her dread of this strange woman grew stronger every day.

She was uneasy too on account of her husband; he had grown moody and silent; he was often absent for two weeks, and replied so coldly to Stella's anxious inquiries that she at length forbore to question him at all, and he came and went as he pleased.

The girl was full of vague terrors; she felt that there was something wrong, though she could not define her fears.

She dreaded the loss of her husband's affections, but he seemed loving as ever when he was with her, though care seemed enthroned upon his brow.

At night he tossed and turned, muttering to himself in his sleep, and to Stella's horror his talk was of blood and murder.

"I shall strike him as he sleeps," he muttered one night, and raised his hand as if to carry out the threat.

At first Stella felt inclined to tell him of this and similar speeches, but she refrained from doing so—she scarcely knew why.

"It is dreadful, but he is only dreaming," she said to herself. "One day I read of such dreams;" then she suddenly remembered that it was of Eugene Aram she had read, and that the dream was no dream, but the forced confession of a murderer, forced from him by his conscience, which gave him no peace day nor night. She shuddered at the thought.

One day her husband arrived suddenly; he looked even more moody than usual, but greeted her affectionately.

"You are pale, Stella," he said; "you stay in

the house too much; you should go out these bright autumn days."

The young wife smiled, and to cheer her husband sat down and played a lively waltz, for she had practiced so diligently and her talent for music was so decided, that she already performed very creditably.

Mr. Lester complained of fatigue, and they retired early. Stella, however, could not sleep; so she rose, and throwing on a loose cashmere dressing-gown, took her seat by the open window and gazed on the river which gleamed white in the moonlight.

Suddenly a voice from the bed startled her. It was that of her slumbering husband, and it was raised in a frightened cry that was almost a shout.

"Take him away!" he said, angrily. "He is covered with blood! I got my hands covered with it when I placed him on the horse. Go! Off!—Across the *pampa*!"

Stella shuddered. Her husband was sitting up in bed, his eyes wide open, but seemingly sightless, and his arm outstretched. After a few moments he sunk back on his pillow, and the frightened young wife breathed again.

He began to mutter again in a few moments, but this time more quietly.

"She suspects me!" he said, in a tone of alarm. "She suspects me, and I believe she has told that Englishman that she does. What if he is one of the sleuth-hounds who drag men down? He looks like one. I fear her, with her cold eyes. I must rid myself of her as I did of the others. No blood this time though; that would not be safe. *Poison*!"

Stella's blood ran coldly in her veins. This was no dream. This man was enacting in his sleep fearful scenes in which he had taken part during some period of his life.

Of what woman was he raving? Could it be the strange housekeeper? The young wife knew that the woman felt a strange interest in her husband, and his allusion to her "cold eyes" seemed to indicate that he was alluding to the woman who was so constantly asking questions about him. Like a flash it came back to Stella how Mrs. Sutton had said: "If he had dark hair I would be willing to take my oath that he was the same man."

"Take her oath!" Stella felt certain that meant—testify against him in a court of justice.

If he had dark hair!

The unfortunate girl almost fainted as she remembered how he looked the night he paid his first visit to her home.

"I shall fly to some far-off place," she said; "I cannot live with a murderer."

All her love for him seemed to die in a moment. She was good, innocent and pure, she abhorred evil of every description. If this man's hands had been stained by the blood of his victims she felt that she could no longer breathe the same air as he did, live under the same roof, or eat the bread he provided.

No, she would rather die.

She resolved that the next day she would pack a few necessary articles in a satchel and fly far from the home where she had been so happy.

She dreaded this man as much as she had formerly loved him. She remembered the night he had come first to her home. How the tempest had lashed the old house, and the voice of the wind through the draughty old rooms had sounded like the wailing of a lost spirit.

"I forgot my dear old father for his sake," she whispered to herself, as she sat in the chilly moonlight. "Oh, how dreadful he looked! Can it be possible that he is indeed a murderer?"

As morning broke her feelings changed. Her husband slumbered peacefully, and Stella grew half ashamed of her fears. Her tender heart began to plead for him. What if it was but a painful dream?

She drew near him and leaned over his pillow, gazing earnestly on his face. Suddenly she started as if a serpent had stung her.

His light golden curls were pushed aside, and his hair at the roots was dark, indeed almost black. Stella remembered Mrs. Sutton's words, "Ladies bleach their hair." What if her husband had done the same?

Was he a criminal hiding from justice? Had he changed the color of his hair to render his identification difficult, if not impossible?

She trembled and turned away, all her terrible doubts and terrors coming back with redoubled force.

Leaving the room quietly she went to her dressing-room, bathed and dressed. She was trying to make up her mind what step she should take, but she felt like a rudderless ship adrift upon the ocean.

Stella was not by any means a self-reliant woman. She had been so peculiarly situated during her father's life that she had scarcely ever thought for herself. She was very young and very untutored in the ways of the world.

"I will call the housekeeper and ask her about the man whom my husband resembles," she said, and acting on the impulse of the moment, she rung the bell and requested the chambermaid to send Mrs. Sutton to her.

The housekeeper appeared, looking surprised, for Stella had never called her to her dressing-room before.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Sutton," she said, pleasantly. "I could not sleep, so I rose and dressed, but Mr. Lester is still asleep. Sit down and let us have a chat."

The housekeeper obeyed, looking as if she wondered what would come next.

"Do you know I've been thinking of what you said about my husband resembling some one? Might it not be a relative of his?"

"No, Mrs. Lester; the man your husband resembles can be no relative; he is, or was, a Scotchman, and his name was Gordon."

"I should like to hear more of him," said Stella. "Will you tell me his story?"

The housekeeper hesitated, then murmured to herself:

"Why not?"

"Of course, whatever you tell me will be in confidence between us," said Stella, reassuringly.

"Well, it is rather a long story, but I shall be as brief as possible."

CHAPTER XX.

THE HOUSEKEEPER'S STORY.

THE two women sat near each other by the open window; below them lay the fields of ripened hay, and beyond them the shining river whose eddying ripples shone like curves of gold under the morning sunshine, while the breeze came freshly upon their faces laden with the odor of hay-fields and clover.

"Well, I must go back a long way, when I was young and full of hope as you are now. I was the only daughter of a poor but proud Scotch family, and I had one brother, many years younger than myself. My mother died when he was born, and she called me to the side of her death-bed and gave little Allan to me. 'Care for him, Janet,' she said, and I always tried to obey her. I never married, but spent my life in devotion to the boy, who grew a strong, manly fellow, clever as he was willful. My father died and we were desperately poor, poorer because our pride of birth forbade all thoughts of work. The Gordons might starve, but honest labor was beneath their dignity; neither was I capable of earning a penny; my education was very superficial and I was not physically strong."

"I could not teach, not being proficient in any branch of learning, but possessing a slight smattering of all; and I could not seek employment as a maid of all work, as I was often tempted to do, for no one who saw me would engage me for such a position, as they could tell at a glance I was not strong enough to fill it. We owned a tumble-down cottage and a few acres of land, and near us lived my uncle, the elder brother of my father, who had inherited the title and fortune, while my father received nothing but the cottage and two hundred pounds a year; this he reduced, by raising money on it, to one hundred (five hundred dollars), and that was all we had to live upon."

"Well, as Allan grew up a bright, handsome boy, I thought I would put my obstinate Scotch pride in my pocket and go to my uncle to beg for help. I did so, and to my no small surprise succeeded in enlisting his sympathy. He had seen Allan often, and he was proud of the boy who was to be his heir, for he never married."

"He adopted him as his own son, and I went to live at the Hall as a sort of upper housekeeper. Of course, I was not so termed, but that was the position I really occupied. My uncle never took to me; I was plain and unattractive, and used no flattery or other means of rendering myself agreeable. All I cared for in the world was my brother. He was sent to England to school, first to Eton and afterward to Cambridge University."

"At college he began to go wrong; he got in debt and constantly wrote to me for money; sometimes he wrote coaxing letters apologizing for his extravagance, at other times bullying letters, telling me he had the best right to his father's income, of which he always spent every penny, though my father had willed it all to me."

"My uncle gave me but a small salary, supposing that I used my annuity to purchase clothing, and, as I would not betray Allan, I experienced no little difficulty in presenting a decent appearance, and gained the reputation in the neighborhood of being a miser. For this I cared nothing; what broke my heart was the fact that Allan was going from bad to worse."

"When he had been two terms at Cambridge, a host of his creditors wrote to Sir Lester demanding their money. My uncle was furious, as he had given Allan a liberal allowance and strictly commanded him to incur no debts. He sent for my brother, who came and openly defied him. A terrible quarrel was the result, and Allan, who was just twenty-one, left the Hall and enlisted as a private soldier in a regiment of the line."

"This, of course, was an open insult to the proud old Sir Lester, who never recovered from this blow, which was followed up by another, for my unfortunate brother's next step was to marry a barmaid. He next deserted, was caught and punished; after this we heard little of him, though he wrote to me occasionally, always demanding money and vowing vengeance against the officer who had given the orders when he

was punished for desertion. I was just beginning to feel secure that our disgrace could go no further, when the terrible news reached me that he had again deserted, after shooting Major Kent, his commanding officer, through the heart."

"My God!" exclaimed Stella.

"Yes, he had fulfilled his threats. Major Kent was the officer who commanded the party who punished him, and he had sworn that he would have vengeance."

"How was he punished?" asked Stella, in a hollow tone, her face being pale as death and her wide, violet eyes full of horror.

"As all deserters are; he was whipped and branded between the shoulders with the letter D."

A shudder passed over the girl's slender frame.

"He escaped, thank God! Though, perhaps, I should not say so; but if he had been taken and executed I should not be here now, for the shame would have killed me."

"Do you know where he is?"

"No, neither his wife nor myself have ever heard of him since the day he fled. My uncle is dead, and the title and fortune would both be his if he were not a criminal and fugitive from justice."

"And you have come here in search of him?"

"I have. I long to see him before I die. My uncle left me a small sum yearly, and that, with my annuity, has kept me from want. I had just sent Allan fifty pounds when he deserted the last time; he must have received my letter a few days before the—murder!"

The housekeeper grew so pale as those words passed her lips that Stella handed her a bottle of smelling salts, and taking a decanter from a closet, poured out a glass of wine and made her drink it.

"It is terrible!" said Stella, when the old woman seemed to have recovered her composure.

"Yes; when I remember him, a bright, happy child, my heart breaks afresh at the thought of what he afterward became. God knows what he now is, whether alive or dead."

"Let us trust that he is penitent and doing well," said Stella, in a low tone.

The housekeeper sorrowfully shook her head.

"I fear not," she replied; "I fear he is only plunging headlong into new depths of wickedness."

"Is his wife living still?" asked Stella, in a peculiar tone of voice.

"Yes; she is in very poor circumstances. I assist her when I can."

"This mark you speak of that was branded upon your brother's back, is it indelible?"

"Yes, he will carry it to the grave with him; he is branded for life!"

Stella's pale face changed; her lips closed firmly; she looked as if she had just resolved upon some important step.

Before either woman broke the silence that had fallen between them there came a knock at the door, and the chambermaid entered in response to Stella's calmly-spoken "Come in."

"Mr. Lester is in the parlor, ma'm," she said, looking a little surprised to see the housekeeper still closeted with her mistress.

"Very well, Nannie; I am coming."

Stella smoothed her hair, and after whispering, "I shall keep your story a secret," she left the room, Mrs. Sutton remaining seated by the open window.

Lester stood gazing out on the river, his face haggard and pale; dark violet shadows lay beneath his eyes, which were heavy and dull.

"Ah! Good-morning, Stella!" he saluted, with an attempt at liveliness, as his wife appeared. "So you have taken to early rising?"

"Yes," she replied gravely.

After the night she had spent, and after hearing the housekeeper's story, it was impossible for her to seem gay or happy.

"What is the matter with you?" inquired her husband, affectionately.

"I do not feel well; I rested badly, and my head aches."

"Rested badly? I slept like a top!"

Stella looked fixedly in his face, and he changed color.

"Why do you stare at me?" he asked, angrily.

"Because you did not seem to rest well; you tossed and turned and muttered in your sleep as if you had nightmare," she answered, quietly.

"Did I? By Jove! Well, you must not mind that; I always have disagreeable dreams."

Just then the bell rung for breakfast, and the husband and wife were soon seated at the table. Neither of them did justice to the tempting meal, and immediately after it was over Mr. Lester announced that he must return to the city.

His wife bade him good-by far more coldly than she had ever done before, but he scarcely seemed to notice it. He drove away without once looking back; his mind was full of other matters. He arrived in New York early, and left his horse and carriage at a livery-stable; he then went to the Grand Central Hotel, where he lunched in a private room.

"Bring me pen, ink and paper," he ordered of the waiter, when the meal was over.

The order was obeyed, and he wrote a few lines, which he folded and consigned to his pocket.

Leaving the hotel, he proceeded to the nearest drug-store, where he handed the sheet of paper to the clerk; he had removed the stamped headline from the hotel paper.

"Is not that rather a large quantity of such a strong remedy?" asked the clerk, looking doubtfully at the prescription.

"No, it is just as the doctor gave it to me; I want a quantity, for I am going on a long sea voyage."

"Oh, very well; the doctor is a careful man, so I suppose it is all right. He has warned you that this is Fowler's solution of arsenic, I suppose?"

"Certainly; please give it to me and let me know the price; I am in a hurry."

The drug-clerk offered no further remonstrance, but made up the prescription and handed the bottle to his impatient customer, who paid the price asked and left the store.

"Queer fellow, that!" thought the clerk, as he put back the articles he had used in attending to his customer's wants. "If Doctor Carter's name hadn't been signed, I'm blessed if I wouldn't suspect that he was going to poison some one."

CHAPTER XXI.

ANXIOUS DAYS.

ASHTON turned to face the intruder, and found to his no small relief that it was Sandy McBean, the Scotch sailor, who had promised his aid in assisting himself and the American detective to escape from the brutal Mitchell.

The detective raised his hand in token of silence, and locked the closet door.

"Now, Sandy," he said, in a whisper, "what is it?"

Sandy signed to him to follow, and led the way to a small cabin aft.

"He's there," he said, pointing to the door.

"If ye can open the bit locker, maybe ye can open yon door."

The detective drew his bunch of keys from his pocket, and soon succeeded in unlocking the door.

"I'll whustle when onybody is aroun'," said Sandy, "an' ye'll ken when I'm no whustlin' that the coast is clear an' ye can win oot."

Ashton entered, and found Ben Blunt lying in a berth, looking somewhat pale and weak.

"Good-morning, Blunt," he said; "can you ever forgive me for being the means of getting you into such a scrape?"

"Oh, yes, I know it ain't your fault. I should have made a break for the shore when I caught sight of that fellow's ugly face, but I fancied he did not know me. Has he told you why he has a grudge against me?"

"Yes," said Ashton, and sitting down beside his friend he related all that had taken place between himself and Mitchell. He also told Blunt of the Scotch sailor's promise to help them, and how he, Ashton, had secured the bottle of laudanum.

"I trust when we reach La Guayra that, with the Scotchman's assistance, I shall get the inside track of Captain Mitchell," he said, and Blunt seemed cheered by the welcome news, but soon looked grave again.

"I'm afraid I shall never find that colored man again," he said, sadly.

"Oh, yes you will; he won't go out of St. Thomas; he'll know there is something wrong, as our baggage is all at the hotel."

Ashton thought it would not be prudent to linger too long with his friend. Sandy had found an old volume of "Bleak House," with which Blunt was trying to while away the tedious hours, and the Scotch sailor also supplied him with such articles of food as were to be found on the Celia. Sandy had "whustled" frequently while the two detectives talked; now he was silent, as Ashton left his friend and emerged. Sandy was cleaning pots and pans, and informed the detective that his services had been engaged as cook, steward and cabin-boy.

"That's lucky; give my friend plenty to eat and drink," said the Scotland Yard detective, and he handed the sailor a gold-piece, which Sandy accepted under protest.

When Ashton returned to the cabin he found Captain Mitchell yawning and stretching himself; he was half-awake, and feeling the bad effects of the many glasses he had imbibed the night before.

"I'm as sick as a dog," he growled, glaring at the detective, as if it was his fault that his health was not good.

"Take a brandy and soda," suggested Ashton, with great apparent sympathy.

"All right, mix it; call Sandy with ice."

Ashton did not intend to stand on his dignity, so he obeyed the request, or rather command.

After several brandies and sodas had gone the same way as the first the noble seaman declared himself "better."

Ashton suggested a walk on deck before breakfast, and the captain assented with a grunt, and accompanied the detective on deck.

Now that daylight had come and the captain was comparatively sober, he began to think that he had acted somewhat hastily in carrying off

his ancient enemy, Ben Blunt, in such high-handed style. He reflected that there would be considerable risk of detection if he murdered the detective outright, and he feared Blunt's anger if he allowed him to escape. Under these circumstances the sailor felt rather, as he termed it, "in a tight place."

Ashton fancied he understood this feeling, and he was determined that he would not assist the brutal Mitchell out of his difficulty.

At length the captain broke the silence in rather an unexpected way.

"Lots of sharks in these waters," he said, gazing down at the heavy rolling waves through which the vessel was plunging.

"I suppose so," responded Ashton, indifferently.

"Yes; if a fellow tumbled in there wouldn't be much chance for him."

"No, unless he was a good swimmer."

"Swimmer! What good would swimming do him if he had ten or a dozen of them daisies after him?"

"Do you lose many men that way?"

"Well, some. Green hands are apt to tumble over if they go aloft, and it ain't no use to lower a boat, for they are finished before it could touch water."

"Terrible."

"Yes; and a shark always follows a vessel; if you watch you will see him during the day."

Ashton pondered over this conversation. He could not see exactly what the sailor was heading at.

Did he intend to murder Blunt and give the murder the appearance of an accident?

Their talk had been cut short by the appearance of Sandy to announce breakfast, and they went below to partake of that meal.

"That fellow in the aft cabin must have something to eat, Sandy," said the captain, when he had finished eating.

"Very well, sir."

"Come on deck, Mr. Ashton, and I will relieve the mate till he gets his grub."

The two men strolled up and down in silence for a time; the captain then spoke suddenly.

"Did you say you couldn't get the money without this fellow's help?" he asked.

"Yes; I might get it, but I don't know how to set about it. He is a detective, you see."

"Yes," said the sailor, blinking uneasily.

"He has a full description of the man we are in search of, and so forth. No; I scarcely think I could do without him."

The captain seemed discouraged by this remark and said nothing for a time, but moodily paced the deck, his hands in his pockets and a short, black pipe in his mouth.

"A big haul you'll make," he said at length, enviously.

"Yes; that's why I am so mad about being hindered in this way," replied the Scotland Yard detective, in an injured manner.

"Well, you see, I had considerable grog aboard, and when I caught sight of that blamed bloodhound's face I couldn't resist the temptation to try and get square with him."

He spoke in a half-apologetic tone and kept his eyes fixed on the deck.

"Can't you get him to tell you how the feller you're huntin' for looks?" he added.

"I might, if I could see him," said Ashton, carelessly.

"Well, I'll let him up on deck if you say so; try and find out all you can."

With these words the captain walked away leaving the detective staring after him.

"He is playing some deep game," reflected Ashton. "Perhaps Blunt may be able to fathom it."

In a few moments he saw Ben Blunt appear accompanied by Sandy. The detective looked very pale and languid, and Ashton felt terribly anxious for fear the savage blow he had received upon his head had injured him seriously.

"How are you, Ben?" he asked, as the American officer sunk into a camp-chair provided by Sandy.

"Feeling weak from being shut up, but the fresh air will soon bring me around."

"Does your head trouble you?" asked Ashton, anxiously.

"No, not much; you see, I've had a good many hard knocks in my time."

"And I fear, Ben, you are in danger of having more."

The Scotland Yard officer then related all that he had heard from the captain, telling Ben how he had affected to agree to all the scoundrel said.

"He intends to murder me," said Blunt, calmly; "but, thanks to Sandy, I have my seven-shooter, and I'll make it lively for him."

"But in all probability he is armed also."

"Yes; but with a knife, most likely. I've seen a good deal of men like him; they rarely carry firearms."

"Well, for God's sake, be on your guard."

"I shall, never fear; so his mind is running on sharks, eh?"

"So it appears."

"How many men can he count?"

"Five; that is, counting him in."

"And Sandy is on our side."

"Just so."

"If we can—in seafaring parlance—'weather the gale' till we reach La Guayra, we can dose the lot and go ashore in peace; but we can't navigate the ship."

"No. I think he means mischief this very night; but here he comes."

They were joined at that moment by the captain, who said to Ben Blunt:

"Well, mate, I put my foot in it the other night; I was half-seas over and didn't know what I was about very well; I hope you bear no malice?"

"Certainly not," replied Blunt.

"That's right; by the way, the sun is now over the mainmast; I suppose you know what that means?"

"I believe on shipboard it is an invitation to take a drink."

"You're right; come below."

All the rest of the day the captain kept up a great show of cordiality toward the two detectives, but he took a chance to whisper to Ashton: "Did you find out what we want to know?" and the man from Scotland Yard replied with a shake of his head, upon which the other muttered an oath below his breath.

"So long as I can make him believe that Blunt is necessary to us, he may not attempt his life," thought Ashton.

It was now evidently a race against time. The two detectives questioned Sandy McBean, but he had to reluctantly confess he knew little or nothing of navigation. Three days passed, during which the captain and mate drank deeply and quarreled frequently; but nothing happened to alarm the detectives, who were in momentary expectation of some attack upon Blunt.

Ashton longed to know how soon they would reach La Guayra, but dared not inquire for fear of exciting suspicion. The crew were a moody, hang-dog set of men, and the looks they cast at Blunt proved that they had no reason to feel kindly toward a detective.

It was the fourth night after Blunt had been allowed to come on deck, and it was excessively dark. The two officers stood together gazing into the black abyss through which the ship was plunging heavily, when Ashton was called below by Sandy.

"I'll come back as soon as possible," he said, and descended to the cabin, where the captain and mate sat drinking as usual.

"Take a glass, mate," said Mitchell, in a jovial manner, though he looked ill at ease and nervous.

Ashton sat down and accepted the glass which the captain mixed for him. He noticed that the sailor's hand trembled.

"Here's luck!" Ashton said, in a hearty tone, but he kept his ear on the alert to catch any unusual sound on deck.

He heard nothing for a time, and was commencing to think his fears were groundless, when all of a sudden there was a hurried tramping of feet as if men were engaged in a scuffle, then a loud splash and a scream for help.

CHAPTER XXII.

FRANK SEYMOUR'S PROMISES.

MISS GORDON'S liking for Mr. Seymour grew stronger day by day, and it seemed reciprocated, for the Englishman spent an hour or two in her parlor daily. He had made every effort to learn whether there was any truth in a report that reached him that the man he was in search of had left South America for New York, and finally came to the conclusion that the story was without foundation.

He then determined to start for the Argentine Republic.

"I shall have to beguile him to some place with which we have an extradition treaty," he said, in conversation with Miss Gordon, "for I cannot lay one finger on him while he is in Buenos Ayres."

"I wish you would attend to some business for me while you are in that portion of the world," said Miss Gordon, and she related the story of her nephew's home-coming, and her doubts and fears.

To her intense disappointment Mr. Seymour's opinion was identical with that of Mr. Dalton. He could not understand why she suspected Frederic of being an impostor.

"His strange English accent," she pleaded.

"Well, my dear lady, he accounted for that in a reasonable way."

"But the idea of his failing to recognize Beatrice Maybray, when he was madly in love with her."

"Which proves nothing; he had forgotten her, or she has changed."

"Oh! you men are all alike. So very dense," exclaimed the old lady, indignantly.

"Oh! you ladies are all alike, so very fanciful," answered Seymour, laughingly.

"Well, I am sure! This is the first time in my life I was called fanciful."

"My dear Miss Gordon, I shall act just as if your suspicions were founded on all sorts of evidence; candidly speaking, I do not like your nephew."

"I thought as much," said the old lady, triumphantly.

"No; he looks to me like a man whose past history preyed upon his mind."

"Just so, and my poor Fred was as open as daylight, dear fellow."

Tears stood in her clear blue eyes or her visitor would have felt tempted to laugh. He thought to himself: "She detests and loves the same man."

"And you promise me solemnly to make every inquiry for my nephew?" she resumed, after a short pause.

"I do."

"I have a detective down there as I told you, but I cannot for the life of me tell what he is about. I hear nothing, and the suspense drives me wild."

"Probably he is waiting till he has something of importance to communicate," suggested Seymour.

"Oh! I'd be glad to hear the merest trifle."

"Well, I shall keep you informed of every move I make. By the way I wonder if your nephew can give me some letters of introduction to parties there."

"Stay to dinner and ask him. He dines at home-to-day for a wonder."

"I have one letter which I think may prove useful; it is to a Spaniard, Signor Madura, who resides near Buenos Ayres."

Frederic Gordon dined at home, and he made an effort to be very polite to Mr. Seymour, but it was evident that it was an effort.

"By the way, Mr. Gordon," began the Englishman, "I am bound for the portion of the world where you spent some years."

"Indeed?"

Frederic looked startled and hastily drank a glass of wine.

"Yes, I am off to Buenos Ayres. Can you give me any introductions to parties there?"

"No," said Gordon, in a hoarse tone, so abruptly, that Miss Gordon gave Mr. Seymour a significant glance.

"Ah! Excuse me for taking the liberty of asking, but I fancied from your long residence in the place that you had friends there."

It was evident that the man felt that he had betrayed too much excitement over such a simple matter as an acquaintance asking for letters of introduction to parties in a place where he had spent so long a portion of his life.

He had committed himself, and he endeavored to make amends. "It is true," he said, hurriedly, "that I lived there six years, but I was poor and had to work for my bread; you would not care to become acquainted with the class of men I was forced by my circumstances to associate with."

"Six years, Fred?" ejaculated Miss Gordon.

"Ten I mean! Good heavens, you cross-examine a man as if he was in a court of law!"

He spoke so rudely, so angrily, that Miss Gordon turned to her guest in the most pointed manner and began a conversation upon another subject.

The host relapsed into a moody silence and did not join his aunt and her friend in the reception-room after dinner.

"What do you think of that?" asked Miss Gordon, when Mr. Seymour and herself were alone together.

"I scarcely know what to say. He was very ungentlemanly."

"Oh! I care nothing for his rudeness to me, but he looked absolutely frightened when you told him where you were going."

Mr. Seymour did not reply, he did not wish to encourage the old lady's suspicions; but he could not find a ready explanation of Mr. Gordon's strange conduct.

"He is an impostor," she said, "and he has many low ways. He is intensely lazy, but refuses to employ a valet; I suppose that he knows that a man who was accustomed to waiting upon gentlemen would see through him at once."

Seymour laughed.

"Oh! you laugh, but it is a fact," she said, gravely.

"Why should not his refusal to employ a servant arise from the fact that he has grown accustomed to waiting upon himself?"

"No such thing, it arises from what I say."

Finding he could not shake her faith in her own acuteness, Seymour changed the subject. He was to sail early the next day, so this was in reality his visit of farewell.

He bade the old lady who had been so kind to him adieu, with a strange feeling that their parting was forever.

Why he should feel so he did not understand. He intended to pay a return visit to New York, on his way to England, and Miss Gordon was in excellent health.

"You will not forget to seek for the real Fred Gordon?" she said, earnestly.

"No; I shall search for him with as much zeal as if my whole mission to South America was in his behalf."

"I know you will find him if he lives. Oh! If I could only live to see him return to his old home, and take that vile impostor by the throat."

"Hush, my dear lady, do not excite yourself so."

"I cannot help it. But good-by. God bless you. Write soon."

With one last friendly pressure of the hand they parted.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BRAND OF CAIN.

ALTHOUGH Stella was far from a determined woman she had made up her mind to learn the truth in regard to the man she had loved so passionately.

So much of Mrs. Sutton's story seemed to point directly to the conclusion that this man whom she called her husband was none other than Allan Gordon, the fugitive from justice and murderer.

She shuddered when she remembered the terrible night she had spent. Her blood ran coldly in her veins as she thought of her husband's fearful words.

If it had only been a dream, why should he say that he had rested well, when his face was haggard, and his heavy, dull eyes told such a different story?

"If he is Allan Gordon, he is not my husband, thank God! for his wife is alive in England," said Stella, and it proved what a state her mind was in, that she could rejoice at the thought.

Pure and innocent as she was, she was thankful that this man was not her husband, for if he had been, she would have considered herself bound to remain by his side at all hazards, though she must tell him that he had revealed his true nature to her, for she was no dissembler.

Now, however, if he should prove to be the man whose story had been related to her by the housekeeper, her course was clear.

He was not her husband, and she would leave him without one hour's delay.

"I shall put him to the test," she said, as she roamed listlessly through the house.

"I shall ascertain if he is the man, and if he is, I shall tell him he is not my husband, and leave him."

He did not return that night, so Stella was forced to endure suspense, the greatest torture the human heart can bear.

Three days elapsed, and Stella, who had been terribly anxious on one subject, viz., how to ask her husband the one question she must ask, found a way out of that difficulty.

The fourth day she heard the rapid gallop of a horse coming up the long drive which led up to the house.

It was a familiar sound for her. Lester often rode out to his beautiful home, and his young wife usually ran down to the door to meet and welcome him ere he had time to dismount.

Now she remained in her place. She sat by the open window with a trifle of fancy-work in her hands. It was making no progress, for the listless fingers and preoccupied mind were unfitted for plying the needle and thread.

"Why, Stella! Did you not hear me coming?" asked Lester, coming in briskly.

She looked up, and he could not help remarking the pallor of her face, the dark circles beneath the wide violet eyes.

"Why, Stella, my dearest, you are ill!" he cried, apprehensively.

"No, I am not ill, Frederic; I am only worried."

"Why are you worried, my pet?"

He took a seat beside her and tried to draw the small head down on his breast, but she shrank back with a shudder.

"Stella!" cried he, reproachfully.

"I cannot help it. I am nervous," she stammered, for do what she would a lingering hope remained in her heart that her fearful suspicions might prove unfounded.

"You are ill, darling; you must see a doctor; but wait, I have something in my pocket that may cure you."

He drew forth a jewel-case and laid it in her lap.

Her heart beat fast, and a rush of tears filled her eyes, so that everything in the room trembled and wavered till the flood overflowed the white lids and ran down her cheeks, falling on the pale pink plush of the jewel-case and splashing it with blotches.

"Why, Stella!" cried Lester, and he knelt before her and took her face between his hands. "You are ill, and you never told me."

"No, I am not ill—only nervous."

"Well, look at this."

He opened the case and displayed a magnificent set of turquoises and pearls. They were of unusual size and very rare and beautiful.

"Oh! how lovely!" cried Stella, true woman as she was, for one moment forgetting her trouble in the contemplation of the beautiful jewels.

"Ah! that has cured you, my sweet," said Lester, joyfully. "Come, try them on."

He clasped the wide band of gold, heavily set with gems, about her creamy throat, placed the earrings in her little ears, and slipped the broad bracelets over her slim white hands.

"Look at yourself, my beautiful little wife," he said, proudly, leading her to the mirror.

She could not but know that the ornaments became her well.

Her trouble, forgotten for the moment, came back upon her with redoubled force as she caught sight of her husband's face smiling upon her in the mirror.

Was it possible that could be the face of a murderer?

All the beauty of the gems, all the sunshine of

the autumnal morning, all the brightness of her husband's smile, once the light of her life, seemed blurred and blotted out of the sight of the wretched girl. Again she shuddered and trembled.

"You are very ill, my darling," said Lester, fondly, as he clasped her in his arms. "This lonely place does not suit you; wait a little and I will take you back to the city. Only a little while and my beautiful wife shall be queen of New York society."

"I do not wish to be queen of any place," she answered, in a low tone.

"But you shall, all the same. I have a bright surprise in store for you."

The day passed, and Stella tried to act like herself and keep her terrible doubts and fears at rest till the moment should come when they would be proved false or true.

She played and sung during the long evening, but the music jarred upon her and her voice was not sweet and powerful as usual.

Mr. Lester suggested that she should retire early; she had resolutely refused to consult a physician, and insisted that her illness would soon pass away; she at once took his advice and retired to her room.

Mr. Lester smoked a cigar out under the trees, and his wife, watching him by the light of the harvest moon, prayed that all her terrible suspicions might prove unfounded.

By and by, she heard him moving about in his dressing-room, and she softly tapped at the door.

"Who is there?" he asked, sharply.

"It is me—Stella."

"Wait one moment."

His tone expressed surprise, for never before had she thus sought him in his dressing-room.

"You are astonished to see me here?" she said, with a wan little smile.

"I suppose you are still a little nervous," replied Lester, pleasantly.

"No, that is not the reason. You have strange dreams, Frederic, and last night I had one. Not only a strange dream, but a dreadful one."

"Yes?" he said, in a strained manner.

"I dreamed that we were sitting under the trees watching the river, and that a police officer came and arrested you, and said you were a murderer!"

His face had turned a sickly yellow while she spoke. She marked the change, but kept bravely on. She had really dreamed the scene she was depicting had taken place, for she was incapable of telling a falsehood.

"I thought he said: 'Your name is Allan Gordon, you are a murderer, and on your back between your shoulders there is branded the letter D.'"

The man's face was now frightful to behold.

It was as ghastly as the stiffened face of the dead.

"What do you mean?" he asked, hoarsely, and his eyes flashed upon her with savage fury.

"It was a dream," said Stella, faintly. His looks had changed so, she would scarcely have recognized him had she met him elsewhere.

"It is a lie, madam! It is no dream; your old villain of a father betrayed me, and you have made up this story for some object of your own."

The fierce look he cast upon her, the fearful oaths he uttered, almost caused her heart to stand still. A bolder woman might well tremble, for he looked as if he felt tempted to add another murder to the list of his crimes.

Stella did not tremble. He had dared to insult the good old father whose death had seemed such a trifling grief because of this man's love!

A pang shot through the girl's heart as she remembered the hasty wedding which took place the very day that dear old father was laid away to sleep his last unbroken sleep.

She thought with, oh! what a bitter sting of conscience, how soon her mourning—the outward garb of woe—had been cast aside. In her heart she had never mourned.

For this man she had forgotten her duty as a daughter!

"My father was no villain," she said, with a calmness that surprised herself.

"He was," he shouted in reply. "He said he would not betray me, when I consulted him about the accursed mark between my shoulders; he could not remove it, but he said my confidence in him would be respected."

"And he kept his word," replied Stella, still speaking in a quiet, even tone.

She knew him now. He was indeed Allan Gordon—the escaped murderer, and deserter from the British army.

His face changed once more. Had he been too easily frightened? Had he betrayed himself by his violence?

"He kept his word?" he said, inquiringly. "He did not tell you?"

"He never breathed one word to me; I never knew why you consulted him."

Lester was silent. He felt that he had ruined himself.

He loved Stella, as evil persons love the pure and good.

"I'm sorry I spoke as I did, dear," he said, approaching her and trying to place his hand

upon her shoulder; but she shrank from his touch as if he had been a snake.

"Ah! you are angry, little one. No wonder!"

"I am not angry, but I never wish to see your face again."

"What?"

Again an angry frown gathered like a storm-cloud over his face.

"You are Allan Gordon, and you have a wife in England. I am not your wife, and I shall leave you as soon as day dawns."

Swift as lightning he raised his arm as if to strike her down. His hand sunk by his side, however, and he said, with attempted calmness:

"You are mad!"

"No, I have been mad. I am sane now."

She rose as she spoke, her long white cashmere dressing-gown trailing upon the carpet, her heavy golden hair hanging far below her waist, and her pale face looking like the face of a visitant from the land of spirits.

"You need not trouble to leave me, madam," he said. "I shall leave this house at once, and I shall not return for ten days; by that time you will probably have come to your senses."

"I hope so."

Without one word of farewell she left the room, and he heard her lock and bolt the doors of her sleeping apartment.

"My God!" he exclaimed, wiping away the huge drops of perspiration which ran down his livid face. "How has she learned this?"

He dressed—for he had worn his dressing-gown and slippers during the interview—and in a few moments the rapid gallop of his horse going down the avenue told Stella that he had left the house.

She ran the bell, and as soon as the chambermaid appeared, said quietly:

"Send Mrs. Sutton to me."

The girl obeyed. All the servants had caught the sound of loud talking, but not the sense of the words which had passed between their master and mistress. They knew too that Mr. Lester had left the house.

"Come to missus," said the girl to the housekeeper. "Master and missus had an awful row, and he's gone back to New York."

With a strange sinking of the heart the housekeeper obeyed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NARROW ESCAPE—FREEDOM.

THE detective followed by the captain hastened on deck.

The night was dark, the sky overcast, and the moon gave only a fitful gleam of light now and then, but the wake of blue fire followed the ship's course as she cleaved her way through the heavy waves.

"Man overboard!" said the man at the wheel, in a cool tone. This accident was not unexpected!

"Help!"

The cry came from astern, and it was the feeble utterance of a drowning man.

"Why in God's name don't you lower a boat?" asked Ashton, seizing the captain by the arm.

"It's no use," he replied, with brutal indifference. "Before we could reach him he'd be chawed up by the sharks. Anyhow, it's only that cussed bloodhound."

"How do you know?" asked Ashton, his very heart sickening with the thought that his friend was perishing while he stood idle.

"Oh! I guess so; none of my men would be darned fools enough to get over the ship's side in these waters."

"Hel—p!" the sound came more faintly, and Ashton strained his eyes to try and catch sight of the man who sent forth the cry of despair.

"Why, you could have easily saved him," he said, indignantly, turning to the captain, who was lighting his pipe.

"I guess not," replied that worthy, coolly.

At this moment a hand touched Ashton's sleeve.

He turned, and by the binnacle light, to his unbounded joy, he beheld the features of Ben Blunt!

"Thank God!" he whispered, for Captain Mitchell stood near.

"So, captain, you've been unfortunate enough to lose one of your men," said Blunt, in a tone of sympathy, after he had exchanged a hearty pressure of the hand with the Scotland Yard detective.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the sailor, dropping his pipe on the deck and staring as if he had seen a ghost.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, darn it, I thought it was you who fell overboard."

"No, it was a short man with a big red beard."

"Perry, by gosh!" The captain used another word.

"I presume so; it was a pity you couldn't save him; he seemed to be a good swimmer."

A terrible oath came from the sailor.

"He seemed to keep afloat for quite a long time," said Blunt. "I was right aft, and saw him fully ten minutes after he went over, and he was breasting the waves bravely and shouting for help."

"As you know so darned much, maybe you know how he got over," growled the captain, fiercely.

"No, I don't."

"My best man gone."

The sailor turned on his heel and left the deck.

"How did it happen, Blunt?" asked Ashton, eagerly.

"Why, after you went below, I walked aft; this fellow sprung on me like a tiger. I gave him a sockdolager between the eyes with the butt of my revolver, but he tried to drag me over. I'm small, but few men are my equal in muscle, so I let him have his own way till he got me to the ship's side. He was dragging me with all his might, and I was holding back with all mine, but when I got to the right place I suddenly yielded, laying hold of the bulwark at the same time; he had got on so much steam that he could not check himself and over he went. He tore a piece out of my sleeve. I shouted for help, but kept out of sight till the fuss was over to see what they would do. They could have saved him, but they thought it was me, and didn't try."

"I'm glad of it," said Ashton. "Now it is only four to three."

"Yes, and there is one fellow who don't like the captain. I overheard him asking Sandy what spite Mitchell had against me, and when Sandy told him I'd sent him to State's Prison once, he said he wished I'd do it again."

"Well, if we can get that man on our side it will be an even score."

"Counting the laudanum as one I guess it's that now."

"I'll tell you another thing, the mate and the captain fight like dogs."

"And I'll tell you something. We'll be in La Guayra to-morrow if the wind keeps fair."

"Then this is the last night at sea."

"Yes. You must dose the noble tar; the other fellows won't care to commit murder for his sweet sake, but he is dangerous."

The captain reappeared on deck, and Ashton immediately took him by the arm and conducted him to a safe distance from Ben Blunt, who went below.

The Scotland Yard detective had transferred the bottle of laudanum from his own pocket to that of his associate. He also gave him his bunch of keys.

"Make good use of your time, Ben," he whispered. "I'll keep him on deck till I see you come back here."

Blunt disappeared.

The cabin was tenantless, and Blunt lost no time in opening the locker where Captain Mitchell kept his stock of liquors.

He drew forth a quart bottle of whisky and poured about an ounce of laudanum into it.

"It's such vile stuff he'll never taste it," he said to himself. He then carefully recorked the bottle, put it back in its place and locked the captain's private wine-bin.

He reappeared on deck almost before Ashton had time to miss him.

Meanwhile the man from Scotland Yard was engaging the captain in conversation.

"Do you know, Cap," he said, in a confidential manner, "I believe we can get all the information we want out of that fellow, if we get him half full."

"Blast him! I wish it was him over the side instead of poor Perry."

"Yes, it seems a pity to lose a good man, but there's no help for it."

"I'll tell you why I don't like it."

The captain had been drinking heavily all day, and was disposed to be communicative.

"Yes."

"I don't like my mate. He's a darn sneak, and there's another sneak on board, and now Perry's gone, it leaves me short-handed."

"That's bad."

"Yes, it is; don't let on to that blamed bloodhound, or he'll be putting old Hacky in their heads."

"Oh! I'll be dumb as a fish. I say, though, Cap, do you know what the Governor of North Carolina said to the Governor of South Carolina?"

"No."

"He said: 'It's a long time between drinks.'"

"Ha! Ha! That's good. Well, come below and we'll find a cure for that."

They proceeded below, and the captain sent Sandy to call Blunt, who of course was nowhere to be seen.

He soon appeared.

"What'll you take?" asked the captain, who was getting out the liquor.

"Gin."

"Gin? Pshaw! that's a Dutchman's drink. Why can't you drink old rye?"

"I don't like it."

"All right; please yourself. What'll you take, Ashton?"

"I'll try Blunt's tipple."

"All right; help yourself."

They sat down and began to talk.

The captain drank heavily; the two detectives, scarcely tasting the poisonous stuff before them, sat talking on all sorts of subjects likely to interest the sailor.

During the conversation the mate came in and

joined the captain in discussing the contents of the drugged whisky bottle.

The detectives were afraid he might detect the flavor of the laudanum, but he did not, and the bottle was soon emptied.

In five minutes the captain was fast asleep, and a short time after the mate reclined on the floor beside him.

"I hope you didn't overdo it," said Ashton, rather apprehensively.

"No, it won't hurt them. They are pretty tough, but we had better put the bottle back in case they should miss it."

This was soon done, and the two detectives went on deck.

"Where's the captain?" asked one of the men on deck.

"Fast asleep in the cabin, and so is the mate."

"They are a pretty pair," growled the sailor. "It's well me and that other feller knows enough to bring the ship into La Guayra, for we'll be there before day."

"You have been there before, I hope?" said Blunt, who had heard of the dangers of navigation among the West India islands, on account of the coral reefs.

"I should say so. I was born and brought up there."

The detectives remained on deck till day broke, when the Celia dropped anchor in the harbor of La Guayra.

"I'll pay you well to take us ashore," said Ashton to one of the men.

"I can't spare the time," replied the man, "but Sandy can go if he likes."

"What in thunder ails the captain and the mate?" asked the other man, who had been below. "Darned if they ain'ta-snarin'down there like they'd took cloryform."

"I am very sorry they are not awake," said Ashton. "I should like to bid them good-bye, but I must lose no time, for Sandy says the steamer for Buenos Ayres sails to-day, and my business has been so long neglected that I must not lose any more time. Please present our regards to them and tell them I was sorry they were not awake to go ashore with us and have a good time."

The two detectives left, followed by the good wishes of the sailors, who were both well paid for their politeness.

Within two hours they were on their way to Buenos Ayres.

Great was Captain Mitchell's wrath when he rose from his drugged slumbers and found the birds had flown. More especially when a negro came on board in a bum-boat, carrying a polite note thanking him for his hospitality, and signed:

"BEN BLUNT,
ROBERT ASHTON,
Secret Service."

He danced with rage.

"They were both bloodhounds!" he shouted, and gnashed his teeth with impotent fury.

"And they fooled us nicely and hocussed our grog," replied the mate, consolingly.

"They didn't."

"They did."

"Shut up! I'm too sick to jaw."

"So am I."

The worthies held their heads and groaned; then betook themselves to their favorite remedy—brandy and soda.

CHAPTER XXV.

A BROKEN ENGAGEMENT—THE FIRST LETTER.

It was difficult for Mariquita to meet her father the day after she learned how treacherously he had acted toward her lover, without betraying some resentment.

He, the lover, was at once elevated to the exalted position of a martyr for his love of her fair self.

Juanita's imagination was very fertile, and she drew largely upon it in picturing a glowing scene when Mona presented the letter. She described the raptures of the signor as if she had witnessed them, and Mariquita actually found herself humming a love song, and feeling so nearly happy that she reproached herself.

"I am singing and feeling gay, while he is so miserable," she said to Juanita.

"He is not miserable now, cara," replied the girl, "for he has your letter."

In the afternoon visitors arrived at the *Casa Madura*.

Don Pedro de Carrara and his son Virgilio. They were warmly received by Signor Madura. Mariquita also received them very pleasantly, and they apparently enjoyed their dinner, and spent the evening in conversation and listening to some fine music, for Mariquita possessed a beautiful contralto voice, and Virgilio a fine tenor.

"What a splendid couple they will make," said old Pedro, admiringly.

"Yes," replied Madura, "he is a handsome young man."

"And your daughter, she is a living sunbeam. Graceful as a humming bird."

"She is a good girl, modest and tender."

"And has never had a lover?" remarked Pedro, inquiringly.

"Never!" said Madura, almost indignantly. "What would you think of me if I permitted such a thing?"

"Of course I know you would not."

"She has been carefully nurtured, watched over like a flower; she is as innocent as an angel, and knows not the meaning of the word love."

This was all highly satisfactory to the two old men, but it was far otherwise with the young people.

"Signorita," said Virgilio, "do you know what the gray heads discuss in yonder corner?"

"No, indeed," replied Mariquita, with a merry laugh.

"They are busy telling each other what a pretty couple we will make; for, let me tell you a secret, they mean us to marry."

"What, signor?"

Mariquita opened her great velvety eyes to their very utmost width.

"It is a fact. They have planned it, and think we shall do just as they say."

"But I won't," protested the girl, stoutly.

"Neither will I," replied the young man, laughingly. "Mariquita," he added, "till a week ago I was at your disposal heart and hand, but I am so no longer. I met and love another. Refuse me, for the love of *Santa Maria*, and put me out of my pain."

"Nay," said Mariquita. "Why should I incur my father's wrath? Refuse me, and go free."

They both laughed, looking meaningfully in each other's eyes, and the two old men nudged each other and whispered that everything was going on just as they wished.

"Do you love, Mariquita?"

She did not answer, but a warm tint like the blossom of the pomegranate stole over the smooth oval of her cheek.

"Ah! I can read your secret in your face."

"Hush! My father would kill me."

"Then let him kill me," said Virgilio, bravely, for the chivalrous blood of old Spain ran in his veins.

"Will you please refuse me?" pleaded Mariquita, raising her lovely eyes to his beseechingly.

"How beautiful you are!" replied the young man.

Her face such a pure oval, her wavy jet-black hair, her velvety eyes with their silken fringes and delicate eyebrows, her exquisitely molded features, and the smooth purity of her complexion certainly were lovely beyond the power of words to paint.

"Nonsense, Virgilio; what has that got to do with it?" exclaimed the girl, pettishly.

"Very little as it is, but a great deal if I had not seen my Laura first."

"Laura; then she is English."

"No, she is American. Wait, turn this way and I'll show you her picture."

He drew a photograph from his pocket.

The face was that of a bright-eyed blonde, as inferior to Mariquita in beauty as the moon's last quarter is to the queen of heaven when in her full perfection.

"A sweet face," said Mariquita.

"Yes, indeed, and a sweet, loving child she is," replied Virgilio, with all a lover's enthusiasm.

Little did the old men suspect the subject of the conversation between the youthful pair.

"You must refuse me," said Mariquita, as they bade each other good-night.

"I'll do it, if they kill me," was the reply, and the girl's great dark eyes looked their gratitude.

When the young mistress of the house entered her room she found Juanita awaiting her.

"Mona has returned, signorita," she said, eagerly.

"Well, what news?"

Mariquita spoke in a low tone, but impatiently.

"Hush, *cara!*" cried the girl. "Your father's guest, Don Pedro, is in the next room and walls have ears."

"Give me the letter," said Mariquita.

"Here it is. Mona says the signor was wild with joy."

The girl drew a letter from her bosom and handed it to Mariquita, who seized it and sat down to read it with a crimson rose of love and hope glowing on her cheek.

"*MY DARLING:*—How can my hand find skill to pen the words my heart dictates? I am an American, and have learned your sweet language from ignorant men, but I am of good family, and as soon as I reach New York I shall be wealthy."

"That I love you seems to me so very evident, it seems scarce worth while to write the truth which you already know so well."

"Mariquita, if God did not mean us to love each other, He would never have allowed us to meet."

"Be true to me, my beau'ful heart's darling, and you shall be my wife. I swear it by the sky above me and my hope of heaven."

"I am impatience itself for Mona to begone with this, so say farewell for to-day."

"My thanks seem worthless, but I offer them in return for your priceless kindness."

"Darling, think with love of yours till death."

"*FREDERIC CAMERON GORDON.*"

Ah, had Mariquita's father seen her then, what opinion would he have formed of the

chances the two old Spanish families had of being united by the marriage of his daughter and Don Pedro's son?

The girl possessed all the fire and passion of her race and the sunny land that gave her birth.

She pressed the letter to her lips, and blushed when she found Juanita's eyes fixed upon her.

"Mona says the signor was wild with joy," she said, "and he is only anxious to get away to claim his fortune, so that he may return for you. He is a rich Americano, and when you are his wife you will live like a princess."

"And I shall take Mona and you with me."

"Ah! Thanks, *cara signorita*," said Juanita gratefully.

"No, for I should never have heard what became of him but for you."

The conversation between mistress and maid was interesting to them, and Don Pedro and his son, who were smoking in their own apartments, were also engaged in animated talk.

"Your future wife is a beauty," said the old gentleman, in a tone of satisfaction.

"She is," replied his son, gravely. He was thinking of Laura.

"I should like you to marry at once, and so would Signor Madura. Mariquita is young, but no younger than your mother was when she became a wife."

"I do not intend to marry her," said Virgilio, calmly.

"What?"

The fiery old Spaniard sprung from his seat, his eyes blazing.

"I said what I mean—you heard me. I will not marry Signorita Madura."

"You are mad! It has been agreed between myself and Madura for years."

"I cannot help it. I will not marry her—put all the blame on me."

A stormy scene ensued, but Virgilio remained firm. He had kept his word and saved Mariquita.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE VICTIM OF THE POISONER

VERY soon after Frank Seymour's departure for South America, Miss Lucille Gordon's health began to fail. She lost her appetite, and suffered from severe headaches and constant disagreeable feelings which her doctor attributed to indigestion.

His treatment did not benefit her in the least, and she daily became weaker.

She grew very nervous, and her anxiety to live till her *real* nephew was in possession of his home and fortune seemed to become greater as she dreaded that she might never realize her wish.

Her prejudice against the man who had usurped his name intensified as her illness increased.

She could scarcely address him with the cordiality which is supposed to exist between such near relatives.

He was very assiduous in his attentions to his aunt, but seldom saw her after she was confined to her own rooms, as she invariably declined to admit him.

A faithful woman, who had been her attendant from youth, waited upon her, and nursed her tenderly.

"Doctor," she said, one bright day, "I feel that my race is nearly run, but I wish to live a few months longer. Have you any objections to calling in Doctor Carter in consultation? I believe he makes a specialty of such cases as mine."

"Not at all; I should have suggested it long ago, but I was afraid of alarming you."

"I am not easily alarmed," said Miss Gordon, smilingly.

"What astonishes me is that you look so well," said the doctor.

"I don't think so, and I feel far otherwise."

That afternoon the two doctors arrived together. Dr. Carter was a remarkably learned and skillful man, but did not win favor with ladies, as he was exceedingly frank and candid. He never condescended to flatter a patient.

He asked a flood of questions, all of which Miss Gordon replied to as candidly as the doctor himself could have done.

"Now, one thing more," said he, putting on his spectacles and drawing up the window shades and twisting up the costly lace curtains as if they had been rags.

He then took his patient by the hand and led her to the window. He stared in her face earnestly.

"Draw up your sleeve," he said.

She did so, and he examined the skin of her arm. She had always been admired for the beauty of her complexion, which was remarkable, and had not suffered from the lapse of time since she was a girl.

"How long is it since your eyelids looked as they do now?" asked the doctor, abruptly.

"I cannot tell how they do look; I very rarely spend much time at the mirror."

The doctor handed her a small glass.

She examined her face. Her eyelids did present a singular appearance. They were very full and clear, as if water rested under the skin, and among the lashes small *spots* appeared, like tiny pearl beads.

"They are not painful I know," said the doctor; "that is why you did not remark them."

"They feel somewhat strange lately, hot and heavy," replied Miss Gordon.

"Yes, the symptoms are making rapid progress."

"What is my disease, doctor?"

"I shall inform you after the consultation is over."

"You need not be afraid of alarming me, as Doctor Gardiner is," said Miss Gordon; "I am not nervous, and I am almost certain that I am suffering from cancer of the stomach."

"You may rest assured that you are not suffering from anything of the kind."

"Do you think I shall recover?"

"That depends in a great measure upon yourself."

The two doctors retired to consult.

When the library door was shut fast Dr. Carter turned to Dr. Gardiner and said:

"Didn't you know that woman was an arsenic-eater?"

"What?"

"Why, she has every symptom of arsenical poisoning fully developed."

"You astound me."

"No wonder; who would suppose a sensible woman of her age would kill herself for the sake of beautifying her complexion?"

"I don't believe she does."

"Then some one else is poisoning her, slowly but surely."

"Great God!"

"It is as true as that I stand here. When that woman is dead, her body will prove the truth of what I assert."

"But who is doing it?"

"Ah! That I cannot tell. If you are certain she does not use it for the purpose I suggest, then some one in the house wishes to put her out of the way."

"But who?"

"I do not know enough of the family to hazard a conjecture. Is her nephew dependent upon her?"

"Not at all. He was his grandfather's heir, though Miss Gordon's fortune is also ample."

"Well, I am not a detective, so I cannot say by whom the poison is administered."

"And you are certain that is the cause of the trouble?"

"I would be willing to swear to it."

"It will be a difficult matter to discover the culprit, or rather murderer."

"Is the maid straight?"

"Perfectly so."

"I'll tell you what to do; recommend a change of air and get her out of the house."

"But where can she go at this season?"

"Florida, Bermuda, heaps of places."

"You had better return with me and give your opinion."

"Tell her she is being poisoned?"

"Gracious, no! Tell her that change of air and scene will benefit her."

"Very well."

They returned, and Doctor Carter gave his opinion with professional gravity.

"Do you really think it will help me, doctor?" inquired Miss Gordon, earnestly.

"I think it will be the means of saving your life."

"Then I shall go; weak though I am, I shall make the attempt."

The doctors departed, and Miss Gordon called her maid to her.

"Place my writing-table here, Maria," she said.

It was done.

"You heard the doctor say that we must go to Florida," said the lady.

"Yes, Miss Lucille."

"Well, as you are not used to traveling, and I am old and sick, I am going to advertise for a young person to take care of us both."

"I am sorry you ain't satisfied with me, ma'am," said Maria, looking ready to cry.

"I am satisfied, you goose, but I take up all your time waiting on me, and I want a smart young person to see to our baggage, buy our tickets, and all that sort of thing."

"Yes, miss, I dare say it would be a good plan," said Maria, who knew nothing of such matters.

So it was settled. Miss Gordon wrote the advertisement, and Maria went out and had it inserted in two morning papers.

Miss Gordon felt better the next day than she had done for some time.

Why this was the case seemed rather mysterious.

The explanation was briefly this. Frederic Gordon, otherwise Allan Gordon, became alarmed when Doctor Carter was called in consultation.

He had been administering arsenic to Miss Gordon in small doses, for he dared not poison her outright as he longed to do.

He had to exercise great caution, for should traces of the deadly mineral be discovered in cup or glass he knew Miss Gordon would suspect him, and suspecting, make her suspicions known.

Doctor Carter had been correct in one of his surmises: Miss Gordon was a woman, and there-

fore she possessed a certain amount of vanity. She knew her complexion was singularly pure and good for a woman of her years. She attributed this to the fact that she never drank tea nor coffee.

She used only milk, and that milk must come from a special farm on Staten Island.

It arrived every morning at six o'clock.

The special farmer who sent it had a young assistant who drove his milk-wagon.

Now the young assistant was not insensible to the charms of beauty, and Katie, one of the chambermaids, was an exceedingly pretty girl.

It was Katie's duty to receive the sealed milk-can and place it in the pantry. This done, she rather enjoyed returning to the front stoop, and while she swept it off, the gallant milkman lingered near and paid her bewildering compliments on her beauty and other engaging qualities. At that hour no one was astir, for if Hazel, the butler, had been liable to find Katie engaged in a flirtation, she would not have dared to indulge in one.

But Hazel was usually engaged in sleeping the sleep of the just, so Katie followed the bent of her own sweet will.

When the clock struck seven Maria appeared, regularly as clockwork, and carried a glass of milk to Miss Gordon, who sat up in bed and drank it.

Katie, when her tender interview with the milkman was over, always poured out the milk and placed the glass upon a silver salver on the pantry table, for Maria did not approve of wasting her time doing things that humbler members of the household could perform just as well as herself.

This was the golden opportunity of which the intended murderer availed himself.

In dressing-gown and slippers he stole downstairs day after day, dropped the deadly dose into the innocent glass of milk, and then returned to his room as he came.

Even then his task was not completed.

He had to listen till Maria, after her mistress drank the milk, came forth and placed the silver salver on a small table in the hall.

It was but the work of a moment to wash out the glass and replace it upon the salver, thus effectually obliterating all traces of the poison.

He had repeated this every day from the time when he obtained the arsenic—for, of course, Frederic Lester, the husband of Stella, and Frederic Gordon were one and the same person—till Doctor Carter was called in. Then he stopped for a time.

Two days after he was about to leave the house when, to his utter amazement and alarm, he saw his wife walk up the steps and ring the door-bell.

He just had time to get out of sight in the pantry when James opened the door, and he heard Stella inquire for Miss Gordon.

CHAPTER XXVII.

FRANK SEYMOUR AS AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

WHEN Ben Blunt and the man from Scotland Yard arrived in Buenos Ayres they were again delayed, for they had to await the arrival of the baggage from La Guayra.

Blunt also wrote to the proprietor of the hotel to send the negro, Jupiter, on immediately, or at least as speedily as possible.

"Nothing for it but another wait," he said, disconsolately.

"And all my fault," replied Ashton. "I was so glad I could speak different languages, but what good did it do us?"

"Well, you did your best, and 'angels can na more.'"

"No; but if it hadn't been for my wild-goose chasing after ships and sailors, we should be much further on than we are. Well, it's no use crying over spilled milk. I'll sit down and write to Miss Kent, for she is all impatience to hear every move I make. Ladies are ten times more exacting than men."

"What bothered you was hearing that your man had left here and gone to La Guayra, and from there on the 'Celia' to some unknown port," said Blunt, reflectively.

"Yes, that was the trouble."

"Well, I shall go out and see if I can pick up any information. I won't write Miss Gordon till I have some news for her."

Blunt was again sadly at a disadvantage on account of his ignorance of foreign languages. In La Guayra every tongue is spoken, but in Buenos Ayres Spanish is the language which is most general.

He wandered about aimlessly, and was glad when Ashton's letters were written, for then he had company.

"Your man was a herdsman, was he not?" inquired the Englishman.

"Yes; but that is not the name Miss Gordon called it."

"She called him a *gaucho*."

"Yes."

"That's the same thing. I shall find a *café* frequented by these men, and see if I can learn anything about the one you are in search of."

The *rendezvous* of the herdsmen of the *pampa* was soon found, and the two detectives became *habitues* of the place.

To Ashton's great joy, many of the *gauchos*

knew Gordon. He communicated the fact to Blunt, who made all sorts of inquiries through his friend who acted as interpreter.

He learned that the story told by the negro was true in every particular.

The man, Gordon, had a friend named Allan. They had both disappeared very suddenly, no one knew where.

The next question was: "Did the two men resemble each other?"

This seemed to puzzle the *gauchos*, who evidently were not observant.

"They all say," said Ashton, "that Allan was dark and the other man a blonde."

Blunt reflected. If Gordon left the *pampa* to enjoy his fortune, and his friend accompanied him, why did not that friend make his appearance with him when he arrived in New York?

He now tried the last test.

He drew forth the two photographs and requested Ashton to inquire of the *gauchos* whose faces they represented.

Loud exclamations passed around the circle.

One of the *gauchos*, who seemed more intelligent than his fellows, placed the two photographs on the table.

"Allan!" he said, laying his finger on the latest photograph of Miss Gordon's so-called nephew.

"Goredong," he added, pointing to the other.

"Miss Gordon is right," exclaimed Blunt. "That man is not her nephew."

"No, it really seems he is not. Well, the next question is: 'What became of the real Frederic Gordon?'"

"That question will never be answered, I fear," said Blunt, sadly. "No doubt remains in my mind that he lies buried beneath the sand of the *pampa*."

"And how will you ever be able to bring his murderer to justice?"

"God knows. I shall take the negro, Jupiter, back, to New York with me, but the impostor has all the necessary papers to prove his identity. He is in possession of unlimited means to pay lawyers, and will experience no difficulty in securing able counsel. All there will be against him will be the testimony of one poor negro."

"Which will count for nothing, for of course Miss Gordon's suspicions are not evidence."

"No, people will laugh at them as the idle fancies of an old lady, and declare that Jupiter is bribed."

"Nothing will do any good but producing the real Frederic Gordon."

"And that cannot be done if his bones are beneath the sands of the desert."

"Well, Ben, you have been such a successful man that you can afford to lose one case."

"I won't do it if I can help myself," said Blunt, doggedly.

"Bravo! That's right."

The detectives, having learned enough for the time being, returned to their hotel, leaving the *gauchos* eagerly discussing the strangers and hazarding wild conjectures as to the object of their visit to Buenos Ayres.

While the officers anxiously awaited the arrival of the negro, Jupiter, another arrival took place.

Frank Seymour landed in Buenos Ayres, and of course took up his quarters at the principal hotel, which was the same one that the two detectives patronized.

He at once inquired for Ashton, and learned to his satisfaction that he was in the same house.

He sought him out and requested a statement of his progress, presenting a letter of introduction from Miss Kent.

The Scotland Yard detective was at first disposed to be very indignant.

Here was a man not even a member of the profession sent out to overlook his work.

"Does Miss Kent wish me to resign and give the work into your hands?" he asked, stiffly; "because if she does, I must get my orders from my superiors in the Yard. I am employed by her, it is true, but I cannot take up and throw down cases on my own responsibility."

"Not at all, my dear fellow!" said Seymour, who saw he had wounded the detective's professional pride. "She has, since you left England, found out a few additional particulars, and, like most ladies, was afraid to trust to the mail to deliver them into your hands, so she commissioned me to bear them. You are not aware of the fact, I presume, but I am her intended husband."

"Do you remain here, sir?" inquired Ashton, already half-appeased, for he could not resist the charm of Seymour's manner.

"Yes; I am at your orders, and perhaps may be of some assistance to you. It is rather a singular fact, but I met a lady in New York who has also sent a detective down here to look up a nephew of hers. A man came from here and presented himself as the heir to a fortune, and she swears he is an impostor."

"And she is right," said Ashton.

He then proceeded to relate the story of Gordon and Allan, and summoned Ben Blunt to take part in what he termed the "council of war."

"I shall vote myself assistant to both of you," said Seymour, and the detectives offered no objections.

"I have several letters of introduction," resumed Seymour; "one is to a Signor Henrico Madura; suppose we go and look him up; he is supposed to live in a *hacienda*, whatever that may be."

"It is a farm-house, or house a little way out of the city," said Ashton.

"All right; suppose you order a trap and we will all take a drive out there."

The detectives offered no objections, and they were all seated in a roomy carriage in less than half an hour and on their way to the *Casa Madura*.

The old Spaniard looked angry and disappointed, and two gentlemen, who seemed out of sorts, were taking their departure from the house.

Seymour presented his letter and was politely received, though it was evident that something disagreeable had just occurred in the pretty home of the old Spaniard.

He spoke no English, so Ashton's services were called for and he acted as interpreter.

Ben Blunt was rather indignant when he heard Seymour tell the whole story of Miss Gordon's doubts and fears in regard to her nephew's fate.

Here was this man "giving away the whole snap," as he muttered savagely to himself, and added, he could "club himself for being fool enough to engage on a case a woman had anything to do with."

Signor Madura listened with an appearance of interest which might have been attributed to his old-fashioned training in the rigid school of Spanish politeness.

He was in an unfavorable mood for feeling any interest in a total stranger's story, however romantic.

He had just had a stormy interview with his old friend Don Pedro and his son Virgilio.

His pride—the ruling passion of his old Castilian heart—had been humbled in the dust when the young man firmly refused to ratify the engagement which had been formed for him by his father.

Madura's heart grew cold in his breast when Virgilio informed him that he could not marry unless he loved, and added that he did not love Signorita Mariquita, and never could love her.

The fiery old man longed to seize his sword and call upon this insolent fellow to defend himself. He could not do so, however, for if he did his child's name would become a household word through the length and breadth of South America.

No; for Mariquita's sake he must swallow his wrath, though it choked him.

He allowed them to depart, and sent a hearty malediction after them.

Now, before he had time to recover his equanimity, these strangers appeared.

He was compelled to sit down and listen to a story in which he felt no interest out of mere politeness.

He was giving what he felt to be vague replies to Ashton's inquiries, when Blunt was requested by Seymour to produce the photographs.

"This," said Ashton, handing the signor the portrait of the real Frederic Gordon, "is the picture of the young man we are searching for."

"Dios mio!" exclaimed the signor.

"What's the matter?"

"Why, it is himself! The young signor who came to me bound upon the horse."

When this was translated to Seymour and Blunt they were all eagerness to hear the story.

"There," said Ben, in triumph; "that accounts for the disappearance of the horse."

"It is possible," said the signor, "that the horse may have formerly been mine; I have owned so many that it is not possible for me to remember all."

"And this man," Ashton said, eagerly; "have you ever seen him?"

"It is the same man, is it not?" inquired the signor, after a careless glance.

"No."

The old Spaniard raised his eye-glass and studied the face with solemn attention.

"No," he said, gravely, "I see it is not, and I see also that this man is unknown to me. I never saw him."

"That is the man who is in New York, enjoying the fortune and position of the real Frederic Cameron Gordon," said the detective.

As he spoke, through a window which opened on the gallery there flitted the light form of the signor's daughter Mariquita.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

"FOR FREEDOM AND MARIQUITA."

JUANITA had not exaggerated the joy which the lonely prisoner felt when he received Mariquita's letter.

She—and of course there was only one woman on earth—loved him.

What cared he for the proud old Spanish father?

Not an iota.

He answered the letter and hurried the negro away with his reply, though Mona was doubtful whether his horse could undergo the return journey without some rest.

"Nonsense," said the impatient lover. "And,

Mona, can you not bring a different horse when you return—one that is fresh and sound?"

"Yes, signor."

Mona knew why the signor asked the question.

He intended to escape. Well, as long as he did it without involving him in trouble, Mona did not care.

Mariquita was generous, and Juanita was devoted to her. If the signor escaped, and became the possessor of a large fortune, as he said, it might be well that he should be under an obligation to Mona.

The negro returned, bearing a letter in reply to Frederic's passionate appeal, and the impulsive girl had replied as her heart dictated.

Therefore her letter was as loving as Frederic could wish.

"Mona, is the horse tired?" asked he, as the negro stood near his window smoking a cigar.

"Better rest to-night, signor; to-morrow night he will be fresher."

Old Irma never suspected that anything was wrong.

She fancied every black in the village was as devoted to the signor as herself.

For this reason she no longer watched her prisoner so closely. He sauntered in and out, apparently as content as if he intended to remain there for the rest of his life.

That night passed, and the day following it.

Then came the time for action.

The tropical moon shone broad and brilliant.

The village was hushed in slumber.

Frederic Cameron Gordon rose from the couch where he had been resting—not sleeping; he had not undressed, only removed his shoes, and he replaced them and left the cabin noiselessly.

He knew where the faithful steed, which he trusted would bear him to freedom, was to be found.

The animal was munching its evening meal still. Mona had not forgotten to feed it well. Beside the horse, half hidden by the bale of a tree, there stood a bag made of twine.

Fred silently thanked the negro for his thoughtfulness as he examined its contents.

A boiled fowl, a loaf of sweet white bread, butter, salt and pepper, and a large flask of brandy and water.

"How did he think of this?" said he, joyfully, as he fastened the bag to the saddle.

As he closed it, a slip of paper affixed to it caught his eye.

On it, in Mariquita's handwriting, were these words:

"Go, and may God protect you. Do not forget. MARIQUITA."

"Forget you, my darling!" cried Fred, pressing the paper to his lips.

"So it was you, my precious dear one, who thought of my long journey."

He mounted the horse and rode slowly out across the sands till he was clear of the village.

Then he increased his horse's easy pace into a rapid gallop.

"For freedom!" he said, exultantly, "and for Mariquita."

He knew not where he was on the trackless waste of yellow sand, but his love had sent him forth with a God-speed, and he rode on.

Mona was wise. He had brought a horse that often journeyed from Irma's village to the city of Buenos Ayres.

He confided this fact to Frederic, and the loose rein on the animal's neck bade him follow his own course.

He did so.

When day broke Fred Gordon stood in the streets of Buenos Ayres, penniless, but free!

"I have been a sailor before," he said, as he reflected on his position; "I shall try if I can't get a passage to New York."

Had he only known the truth how happy he would have been, but fate is ever the master of poor weak mortals.

Before dark he had secured a passage on a sailing-vessel; he knew he must be weeks at sea, but he cared nothing for that.

"I shall reach home destitute and rough," he said, hopefully, "but aunt Lucille still loves me; I shall tell her of my little Mariquita, and I shall return for her, looking very different from the forlorn object I was when she first beheld me."

The price of the horse, which he disposed of—thinking with a grim smile that he would have to return the sum thus obtained to the signor—enabled him to procure some suitable garments for the voyage, and he left the next day for his native land.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MISS GORDON'S COMPANION.

MRS. GRANT was not surprised when she received Stella's message. She had heard the loud voice of the master of the house, and she very nearly surmised the truth.

"Ah, Mrs. Sutton," said the young girl, calmly.

"Wait, Mrs. Lester, till I see if there are any eavesdroppers near."

She glanced into both the rooms adjoining Stella's and out into the hall, then locked the

three doors and drew her young mistress to a seat near the window.

"You can now speak safely," she said, and she carefully wrapped the girl in a warm shawl, for she was trembling from head to foot, though more from nervousness than cold.

"Mrs. Sutton," said Stella, her great eyes wide open and full of the silent agony that rent her heart, "you said that if that man's hair was dark you could swear that he was your brother."

"Yes, I did."

"His hair is dark. He has changed the color of it, and the first time I ever saw him he came to consult my father, who was a doctor."

"Was he ill?"

"No; it was a terrible night of storm and tempest. We were very poor, and we lived in an old house in a very common neighborhood; he came, and his hair and beard were dark."

"Well?"

"To-night I told him a dream I had. I dreamed that we were sitting on the lawn watching the river. All was pleasant and gay, the sun shone and the birds sung. All at once a policeman came up and told him he was a murderer, that his name was Allan Gordon, and that he wore a brand upon his back."

"You told him this?"

Mrs. Sutton face was pale, and she spoke in a low tone.

"Yes."

"You did! What did he say?"

"He flew into a violent passion. He cursed my father, and said he had betrayed him."

"What?"

"Then I knew why he consulted him. He had tried to get my father to remove the mark from his back."

"I feared so."

It was rather a wail than aught else that came from the housekeeper's pale lips.

"Yes, I have no doubt that the man I have called a husband is your brother, Allan Gordon."

"Poor child! Poor child!"

"Do not pity me," said Stella, quietly. "I forgot my father as soon as the last breath left his lips; for a stranger I cast aside the love that sheltered me all my life. I deserve no pity."

"Poor child! Poor! poor! child!" repeated the housekeeper.

"He is not my husband, thank God!" Stella resumed, "his wife is alive; I shall go away as soon as it is light, and never see his face again."

"But what can you do? What will become of you?"

"I am young and strong. I can work," the girl replied, drearily.

"Ah! me, the child I took from his dying mother's arms and promised to watch over and tend," moaned the housekeeper.

"You did your best."

"Yes, I did. He was born to be a curse to all who knew and loved him. To think of the man I knew as an innocent child."

"He is innocent no longer. I thought he intended to murder me to-night when he cursed my dead father."

"Oh! Stella."

"It does not matter. Nothing does matter it seems to me. To-morrow I shall go away; I wish it was not a sin to bury one's troubles beneath the river."

"Hush, Stella! Never that."

"No, I shall go away. Will you help me pack up my plainest dresses, and to-morrow I shall leave here. I can easily get a place to mind and care for little children. I love children."

"Yes, I will help you. It is not right for you to live with him. His wife is living."

"And you? What will you do?"

"I shall stay. I promised my mother I would fill her place toward him, and a mother never deserts her child."

"Good woman!"

"No, no, if I had been as good as I should have been he would not be what he now is."

"You reproach yourself unjustly. You have been—not his mother, but his slave. You have sacrificed yourself to him, and encouraged his selfishness. You have been only too good!"

"I have done wrong, have been blind."

"And you will stay here?"

"Yes. I cannot desert him."

Mrs. Sutton—or rather Janet Gordon—remained with Stella that night; she did not sleep, neither did the young creature over whose bright head such an ocean of trouble had suddenly rolled.

In the morning a few plain garments, a few changes of linen were packed, and Stella bade Janet good-by and drove into the city.

Stella did not intend that the coachman who drove her should know her address. So she requested him to drive to the Metropolitan Hotel. She engaged a room, but merely had her trunk placed in the office, and ordered her breakfast.

She did not intend to remain, so declined the offer of the clerk to have her baggage sent up to her room.

"I am going out," she said, "and shall send for my trunks; I am going to stay with friends, but arrived in the city so early that I did not wish to go to them at once."

She left the hotel and purchased a morning paper.

In the "female help wanted" column the following advertisement caught her eye:—

"WANTED—A young lady of good education and cheerful disposition to accompany an invalid lady to Florida. Apply in person at—Fifth avenue."

"I will call and see the lady," said Stella; "though I fear I am too young, and I certainly feel far from cheerful."

She called on Miss Gordon, and, as we have seen, very narrowly missed meeting the man whom she had believed to be her husband face to face.

To her great joy and surprise Miss Gordon engaged her at a good salary.

"When can you start?" asked the old lady.

"At once, madam."

"I am glad of that; we leave this afternoon."

"Where shall I send my baggage?"

"To Pier 20, East river. We go by the steamer to Jacksonville."

"I shall be there. What hour does the steamer sail?"

"Between three and four."

Stella lost no time in useless conversation; she soon left the house, for she trembled lest Lester—or Gordon—should ascertain that she had flown from him.

How little she dreamed that he was in the very house where she met her new employer.

He watched her leave the house, and determined to learn the object of her visit.

He feared that she had found out he was personating Miss Gordon's nephew and had called upon that lady to unmask him, and prove that he was an impostor.

He had learned from the butler that his so-called aunt was going to Florida, and he had fully made up his mind to run the risk of administering a fatal dose of arsenic the next morning, for if she once left the house she was safe. He would find no opportunity of removing her from his path.

He had no idea that she was going that very day.

"I shall make an excuse of this intended journey to call upon her and inquire concerning her health," he said, as he walked up-stairs and knocked at the door of Miss Gordon's sitting-room.

To his surprise he found the old lady seated in an easy-chair, surrounded by trunks and sachets, which Maria, assisted by one of the chambermaids, was busily engaged in packing.

"My dear aunt," exclaimed he, "I have just learned that you intend to visit Florida this winter."

"Yes," said Miss Gordon, coldly.

"Do you think it safe to venture on such a long journey so soon after your illness? Had not you better wait a few weeks?"

"No; Doctor Carter says I shall never get well if I stay in this house, and I believe he is right."

The guilty man changed color. Did this doctor suspect him of poisoning his aunt?

Impossible! No one could know his motive for committing this murder, for had he been the true Frederic Gordon he would have had no motive for doing so.

"Perhaps I had better accompany you," he said, nervously; "it is not right for you to go alone. When do you leave?"

"This afternoon. No, thank you, I don't care to have you with me, and you don't care to leave New York. I shall not be alone, for Maria goes with me, and I have engaged a young lady as companion—Miss De Payster."

That afternoon! She was saved, for he could find no opportunity to poison her even if he dared attempt it, which he did not after the significant words spoken by the doctor.

"A guilty conscience does not need to be accused."

And Stella had come by accident to engage as Miss Gordon's companion!

She had kept her word and left him, for she had resumed her maiden name.

How had the girl, so young and innocent, learned the whole truth?

Like a flash of lightning the evil-minded villain guessed the source of her information.

The housekeeper, whose face had risen before him like the face of an accusing spirit, was none other than his sister, Janet.

He had been absent from England six years, and he had not seen his sister for some time before.

He remembered the meeting on the stairway, when he had started as if he had seen a ghost.

Janet, no doubt—changed by time, bitter sorrow and deep disgrace. Changed to a mere shadow of her former self by his terrible crimes.

He felt no remorse, however, no sting of conscience, nor self-reproach.

As Gertrude Kent had said, he had no good trait in his character, and base ingratitude was numbered among his evil qualities.

He inwardly cursed Janet for her interference—not that he cared for Stella. Indeed he was glad to be rid of her, as she might prove dangerous, now that she had learned the truth.

He had been silent while these thoughts surged through his brain. He feared Miss Gordon might think his silence strange, so he said, carelessly:

"Who recommended the young lady to you?"

"No one," replied Miss Gordon. "I advertised for a companion, and she came to see me. Lots of others came with piles of letters of reference, but I liked this girl and have engaged her."

"Shall I go to the pier with you?" asked he, trembling for fear she would say "yes," and he should meet Stella face to face."

"No; the doctor is coming for me, he will see me safe on board. I can say good-by now."

She shook his hand coldly and drew back when he attempted to kiss her.

"We have not got on well together," she said, looking him straight in the face, "and I want no Judas kisses."

His face grew pale, and he turned away without one word and left the room.

"Curse her!" he muttered. "I believe she suspects me. I must see Janet and ascertain whether she has told the whole story to Stella or not. How lucky it was she did not see me; if she had, the game would be up. I must shut Janet's mouth by fair means or foul. I shall send her back to England at once."

He went to the livery-stable he always patronized, and hired a horse to ride out to the home Stella had left forever.

CHAPTER XXX.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

JANET SUTTON was not surprised when the chambermaid informed her that the master was in the reception-room and wished to see her.

All the servants were on the *qui vive* and greatly excited by the sudden turn affairs had taken.

There had been a "row" between the master and missus, and the latter had packed her trunk and left the house.

True, she had taken only one-tenth the articles which filled her wardrobes; her jewels were all left behind; they had been carefully put away and locked up by Mrs. Sutton, and every one in the house was on the alert for the close of the game.

Many wild conjectures found expression in the basement, but one and all of the help sympathized with Stella.

"I don't old with married men as keeps such concerting hours," said the coachman, who was a cockney.

"No more do I," said the chambermaid, Nannie, who looked upon him as her private property. "My husband, if I ever have one, must spend all his spare time with me."

"Hand so he will, my dear," replied the Jehu, fondly, whereupon the young lady immediately, with the inconsistency of her sex, told him to "get out."

Mrs. Sutton smoothed her hair and walked down-stairs.

She knocked at the parlor door, and in response to a gruff "Come in," entered the room.

"Shut that door, ma'am; sit down and tell me where my wife is."

She shut the door and sat down. She raised her eyes to his face as he stood before the fireless grate and said quietly:

"I do not know."

"That is a falsehood."

"It is not. She left here this morning after packing a few articles in a trunk. I did not ask her where she was going, neither did she tell me."

"She is a lunatic."

He knew Janet now; he recognized in the worn face traces of the loving countenance that had ever worn kind and forgiving looks for him, the wild boy, the shameless spendthrift and dissipated idler, and last of all, the outlaw and murderer.

He knew her, but he was not yet certain that she recognized him.

"What absurd story is it that my wife got hold of?" he asked suddenly, not meeting Janet's clear gaze, but keeping his eyes fixed upon the window.

"Did she not tell you?"

"She partly did—that's to say she related some stuff, and I should like to know where she got hold of it."

"I told her the story of my brother Allan. The unfortunate whom I came to America in search of."

"Why did you come in search of him?"

He kept his face turned away from her, still staring out of the window at the trees with their autumnal coats of crimson and gold, at the river glancing silver white in the sunshine, at the clear sky overhead; staring at them and seeing nothing.

"I came because he is heir to his uncle who is dead. If he could clear himself of the charge of murder, he would be Sir Allan Gordon, and one of the richest noblemen in Scotland."

Something like a groan burst from his lips.

In that moment, as a drowning man is said to do, he saw all his past life presented to his mental vision like a vast panorama. His willful childhood, so impatient of the gentle control his loving sister sought to exercise. His mad career at school and college. His headlong folly in entering the army as a private soldier, his desertion, capture, and cruel and degrading punishment, and then the terrible crime that rendered

him an outcast. His life on the lonely *pampa*, a life of toil and privation, and other fearful things, from the contemplation of which he turned away with a shudder.

All this he saw, and more. He saw that he might have been a man of an old and honored name, of high rank and exalted station, commanding respect, surrounded by noble friends.

Wealthy, respected and happy. Free to meet the eyes of all the world; blameless before mankind's keenest investigation; unabashed by sharpest scrutiny; spotless, unstained by blot, or even tinge of dishonorable action, much less encrimsoned by crime.

"If he could clear himself of the charge of murder," Janet repeated, slowly, as if she longed to cheat, delude herself into hoping against hope.

She knew he could not, but he hesitated.

The crime had been committed six years ago—the evidence against him was purely circumstantial. If he had plenty of money might he not employ lawyers to defend him?

The worst feature in the case was his flight after the crime had been committed.

He was not aware of the loss of the letter which fell from his pocket in his hasty flight.

"Janet," he said, suddenly, "I am innocent of the crime!"

"Oh! Allan."

She sprung up with outstretched arms, and the brother for whom she had sacrificed herself all her life passively allowed her to embrace him.

"You are innocent?" she cried, joy lighting up her face till it almost gave it back its youth.

"Yes; I did not shoot him."

"Then who did?"

"How can I tell?"

"But you deserted, and you had sworn that you would murder him."

"Pshaw! A man will say anything when he is angry. I deserted because I was afraid they would try to throw suspicion upon me."

"But that was the worst thing you could have done."

"Nonsense! Why should I stay and let them hang me?"

"Well, Miss Gertrude Kent has come into a fortune now; she vows she will hunt you down if you are alive."

"Come into a fortune?"

"Yes; she sent a gentleman to Jane, your wife, and he gave her money for your picture, the one you had taken at Cambridge in the cap and gown. She told him all your history, and he said Miss Kent had employed detectives, men from Scotland Yard; they found that you had been in South America, and when I heard that I came here to see if I could find and warn you."

"And Jane gave them my photograph, or rather sold it to them? Curse her."

"Well, you know you did not treat her well."

"No matter; to sell me like that. So Miss Kent is rich, and she has sent the bloodhounds to trail me?"

"Yes; she swears she will never take comfort out of her fortune till her father is avenged and his murderer brought to justice."

He was silent again. This put a different face on the matter. It was one thing to return and stand a trial, which would be but feebly prosecuted by lukewarm military authorities, for a half-forgotten crime; but quite a different thing to stand up before a jury of indignant men and be accused of the same crime by the daughter of the man whom he had murdered.

The girl, too, whom he had insulted—a girl of bravery and determination beyond the common, and worst of all, with all the aid on her side which a large fortune, unlimited wealth, has the power to invoke.

"The worst thing was the letter they found," resumed Janet, anxious that he would, if possible, clear away every doubt from her mind, though her heart sunk within her breast, for she had believed him guilty from the day she first heard of his crime.

"What letter?" he asked, sharply.

"The letter you had written to some one, and dropped on the floor. In it they said you vowed vengeance against Major Kent and declared you would desert after killing him."

"Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Then the jig is up. No powers on earth can save me."

Janet's face fell. She knew he was guilty!

"Fortunately I am in a good position here," he said; "I have plenty of money—all I want, a fine position, and as good society as I could find on the other side. After all I shall not trouble myself."

"No, but others will trouble you," said Janet, anxiously.

He was her brother; no matter how black-hearted a criminal may be, there is usually some one, nearly always a woman, who clings to and pities him still.

"They cannot; I defy them. I have another name, a different place in the world. They cannot identify me with the deserter, Lester."

"They can and they will. I knew you!"

He turned pale and tugged at his blonde beard savagely.

"You didn't know me positively."

"I did, after Stella told me you had dark hair when first she saw you."

"She did, eh?"

"Yes, your hair and beard are both changed in color, but detectives are all well-posted in regard to disguises."

"Well, Janet, Stella is gone. I'm glad of it, for I was growing tired of her. I will not go to England; it is too risky. The best thing you can do is to return there, for if they are trailing me they may trail you."

"That is true," said Janet, sadly.

"I will give you plenty of money. I have some in my pocket; but wait; you are a good business woman; can you not sell off everything that is here? Pay the servants and keep what's left. Here's two hundred dollars in case you want some cash before the sale comes off. I'd better not return here."

"But, Allan, shall I never see you nor hear of you again?" she asked, wistfully.

"You'll hear of me; write to me at the post office, New York City."

"What name shall I address you by?"

"Anything. Call me Mr. Curtis—R. H. Curtis. If you let me know where you are I will send you plenty of money."

"What am I to do with the money realized by the sale?"

"Keep it. Pay whatever is owing to tradespeople and servants, and keep the balance for your own use. Now good-by, Janet. Take care of yourself, and if you hear of any move on the part of the enemy, let me know."

He shook her hand, walked out of the house and sprung on his horse's back, and was gone before she recovered from the shock of the feeling that this was their final parting.

The brother she had loved and suffered for parted from her as coolly as though she had been an utter stranger.

She had said she would never desert him, but he felt no compunctions about deserting her. She had sought him out to warn him of the danger that threatened him, and he had not even thanked her.

With a feeling of unutterable bitterness in her heart Janet set about carrying out his wishes.

Everything must be sold. Even Stella's fine dresses and jewels. The servants had been paid regularly and Janet had not any tradesmen's bill to meet; so the largest sum she had ever possessed in her life remained in her hands.

She packed her simple wardrobe in one trunk, and sailed for England three days after she parted from her brother.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MUTUAL CONFIDENCE.

"TELL me your story, Stella," said Miss Gordon, one day as she sat in the cool piazza of the St. James Hotel, in Tampa, Florida.

She was better, indeed quite well, and had never in her life felt less like dying.

Her eyes were clear as diamonds, her pure complexion wore the rose-tint of health, and—but for her snowy hair—she might have passed for a woman of thirty.

She liked the girl very much indeed; had she been of a demonstrative disposition she might have said she loved her. Stella was so gentle, so sweet, and so anxious to please that she had quite won Miss Gordon's heart. With returning health the old lady said she felt as if she had a new lease of life.

"I don't look half my age," she remarked, upon the day in question, "and I feel as if the world had grown younger too."

"How do you know I have a story, dear Miss Gordon?"

"Because your face tells me so. Come, dear, I've told you mine, tell me yours."

She placed her hand on Stella's and smiled, not only with her lips, which were fresh and sweet as strawberries, but also with her eyes, which were blue as the sky of midsummer.

Stella felt touched. She had been motherless ever since she could remember. Her father had ever been kind, but he was a studious, abstracted man, and he could not enter into the hopes and fancies of a young girl. Stella's love-dream—it seemed little more—had been very brief, and she had longed to confide in some one, so she told her story unhesitatingly, suppressing all names.

Miss Gordon listened with grave attention. This mysterious man who had changed his appearance, who was a murderer, interested her deeply.

"Poor child!" she said, with a depth of feeling few of her acquaintances would have given her credit for.

"Yes, it is terrible! When I think of the last interview I had with him I shudder."

They had been four weeks at Tampa, and were thoroughly happy and congenial.

Stella's sympathy for Miss Gordon had been so frank and spontaneous that she had awakened a warm interest in the old lady's heart. She believed in her suspicions, too, and that was just what Miss Gordon had been looking for—some one who would think just as she did and never contradict her in the slightest degree.

Stella believed that her nephew was not her nephew. She was firmly convinced that he was

an impostor, if not a murderer. She had herself just received such a rude awakening from her dream of love and confidence in everybody that she was almost ready to believe any one a criminal.

"Never mind, Stella," said Miss Gordon; "you shall stay with me now, you shall be my daughter, and if the real Frederic Gordon returns—who knows?"

At this moment an interruption occurred. A call-boy appeared with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"A dispatch for you, ma'am," he said, handing it to Miss Gordon.

She read it hastily.

"When does the steamer sail for New York?" she asked, eagerly.

"To-morrow at eleven o'clock," said a gentleman who was within hearing.

"Eleven in the morning?"

"Yes, Miss Gordon."

"Stella, give Maria orders to pack up at once."

"Are you going to New York?" asked the girl, in astonishment.

"Yes, Stella; whisper—the real Fred Gordon is in New York! This dispatch is from my lawyer, Mr. Dalton."

"Impossible!"

"No, and that impostor has had him arrested as a confidence-man who attempted to blackmail him. Think of it!"

"You will soon set matters right, Miss Gordon, when you reach home."

"Yes, yes; how I wish I was there. I am in a fever to be gone."

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE TWO CLAIMANTS.

THE "real Fred Gordon," as he was termed by his aunt Lucille, had a somewhat rough passage to New York.

The captain was an old Scotchman, with a strong love of Scotch whisky and an unsurmountable deafness. He was a brave and skillful navigator, and had commanded the "Rosedale" so long that her owners would have felt loth to trust her to any other man.

Captain Auld liked Gordon, because he formed an idea that he was a fellow-countryman; it was perfectly useless to try to convince him of his error, so Fred allowed him to retain the opinion after vainly shouting a contradiction till he was hoarse and weak.

The ship arrived in New York one dark morning, and the captain invited Fred to go ashore with him and breakfast at the Astor House. During the progress of the meal he entertained the young man—who had been born and brought up in the city—with an account of its terrible wickedness, and warned him against trusting man, woman, or child, if they lived in New York.

As soon as possible Fred got rid of the captain, and the returned wanderer took a cab and started for his old home, picturing to himself the hearty reception which he felt certain awaited him.

He alighted from the cab and rung the bell.

The butler happened to be in the hall and opened the door himself, a proceeding he did not often indulge in, considering it beneath him.

"Hallo! Hewson, do you know me?" asked Fred, extending his hand to the old servant who had known him from babyhood and also his father.

"My God, sir!" exclaimed the old man. The sham heir had not noticed Hewson. How could he?

"What's the matter?" asked Fred, briskly.

"I hope aunt Lucille is well. Where is she?"

"In Florida, sir."

At this moment a door was thrown open and an imperious voice inquired:

"Hewson! what's the matter?"

"Nothing, sir; my stars!"

Fred recognized the voice, his sunburnt face grew crimson.

"Who is that?" he asked, turning half-savagely to the old man.

"Good Lord! sir, how can I tell? I'm all upset—dear, dear!"

"What's this disturbance about?" said the sham Frederic Gordon, as he strode into the hall.

His face blanched when he saw who the intruder was.

"Well, Allan!" said Fred, coolly, "so you arrived in New York before me?"

A sort of gasp broke from the impostor's lips, but he recovered himself instantly.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he inquired, haughtily.

"That's a good joke!" laughed Fred, looking him full in the face. "So my dream was not a dream, that you stabbed me in my sleep and stole my papers?"

"Fellow, leave this house, or I shall have you arrested."

"Do so, if you dare! Villain, murderer, branded outlaw!"

Fred seemed about to spring upon him, and the servants, attracted by the loud voices, clustered about the doorway.

The real Fred Gordon turned, and seeing a familiar face among the crowd, said:

"Oh, Mrs. Grafton, do you remember the boy

who was so fond of your strawberry jam that he learned hymns on Sunday in order to be rewarded with a large plate chock-full of it?"

"Yes, indeed I do, sir," replied the house-keeper, and she eagerly grasped the hand Fred extended to her.

"See here!" interposed the sham. "I am Frederic Gordon, my grandfather's heir. This man is an impostor, and any one who pretends to recognize in him the true son of Mr. Gordon, can now take warning that they are no longer in my service."

"Then I shall do so," said the old butler, with dignity.

"And so shall I," added Mrs. Grafton, "and I have no objections to add that I always knew you wasn't Master Fred. You never had none of his ways, so you didn't."

The sham heir glared indignantly at the speakers. They were the only servants in the house who had been there when Fred left his home, and they had both recognized him.

Meanwhile, the impostor had sent one of the footmen for an officer. Fred felt tempted to lay him senseless upon the floor, but deemed it prudent to restrain his feelings.

"I call you all to witness," he said, slowly, "that this man is an escaped murderer. He is English, a deserter from the army, branded on the back with the letter D. We were together in South America, and I was fool enough to tell him my story the night I saw the advertisement my aunt addressed to me. I was to leave for New York next day, but he stabbed me in my sleep and stole my papers. He tied me on a horse, which carried me to a house where I found friends. My aunt Lucille, and Mr. Dalton, my grandfather's lawyer, will recognize me fast enough. Well, officer, what do you want?"

"I was sent for to arrest you for creating a disturbance."

"Very well, arrest me. I have spent nights in worse places than a New York station-house, and I don't expect to spend even one night there. I am ready to go."

The sham Frederic Gordon turned away, and the officer did not know how to proceed.

"Am I to take this man in charge, or not, sir?" he inquired.

"Certainly; the charge is attempted blackmail."

"Very well, it is two o'clock, sir; you had better be in readiness to appear against him."

"Rather an extraordinary home-coming," Fred Gordon remarked to the officer, as they walked to the station together.

"I don't understand the business," replied the policeman.

"No; you will understand, however, if you are present when the examination takes place. What justice shall I appear before?"

"Justice Griffen."

"All right, I only hope he is a sensible man."

"He is. Here we are, sir."

Gordon lost no time in summoning Mr. Dalton. He wrote him a note stating the facts of the case briefly.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed the old lawyer, when he read the note; "then Miss Gordon was right after all."

He hastened to the station and found Fred awaiting him. He was roughly dressed in seafaring garments, but he arose and advanced toward Mr. Dalton with extended hand, recognizing him instantly.

"How do you do, Mr. Dalton?" he said, heartily. "You have changed so little I knew you at once. How is Jessie?"

"She is much improved in health," replied the lawyer, "but still unable to walk."

Jessie was his only daughter, and was a sufferer from a spinal affection.

The lawyer sat down and Fred told his story, to which Mr. Dalton listened with grave attention.

"Is it possible," said Fred, in conclusion, "that you believed that impostor was Fred Gordon? Did my aunt Lucille believe it?"

"Your aunt has always doubted," replied the lawyer, with professional caution.

"Ah! I should think so. Well, when shall I be able to return and pitch the murderous scoundrel out into the street?"

"Go easy, my dear sir. He is in possession, a point in his favor; he has been received as Frederic Gordon by New York society, and he has all your papers."

"What does that matter?" asked Fred, impatiently, "don't you know me—ain't I Fred Gordon, who used to help amuse Jessie on her 'criss-cross days?'"—this was a name the invalid had given days of extreme suffering when Fred and herself were children.

"Of course I know you are Fred," said the old lawyer, almost affectionately; "but we don't want assertion, we want proofs, if the case comes to court. This man looks like you."

"His hair and beard are black as coal naturally, and he is branded between the shoulders, for he is a deserter from the British army and a murderer to boot."

"Dear me!"

"Yes, I was ass enough to tell him my story, and he took advantage of my folly, that's all."

"I shall telegraph for your aunt; on her return we will set to work to oust him."

"All right."

Fred's case was called, but the sham heir to his name and fortune did not appear against him, and he was discharged.

By Mr. Dalton's urgent request Fred returned to his house with him, and promised to remain his guest till his aunt Lucille arrived from Florida. He renewed his acquaintance with Jessie, his old playmate, and they recalled trifling events of the past amid hearty laughter from all. Mr. Dalton acted as Fred's banker, and he was soon as fashionably dressed as the impostor who had stolen his name and position. He called upon Mrs. Gould, formerly Miss Beatrice Maybray, and she not only recognized him, but related the story of the detective's visit, and declared she had always believed the other claimant to be an impostor, because he had failed to recognize her portrait.

All was going on smoothly with Fred, but Allan Gordon was in terrible suspense. He knew that Miss Gordon would throw all her influence on her nephew's side; the old servants knew the real heir from the false one. Mr. Dalton, the family lawyer, had acknowledged him and warmly espoused his cause. True, he had the papers, but he knew that he could make no stand if cross-examined in a court of law in regard to the past life of Frederic Gordon.

"He'll win the case, and I'll go to State's prison," he said, gloomily. "The best thing I can do is to gather as much cash as possible, and light out."

He found, however, that Mr. Dalton had shrewdly guessed his intention and served an attachment notice on his bankers, so that he could not touch one cent either in money or securities. He was completely baffled on every side. He ground his teeth with rage, as he reflected that if he had led a different life he would now be a wealthy baronet with nothing to trouble him, instead of a wretched outlaw—hunted and branded.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SEARCH-PARTY RECALLED.

"Who speaks of Frederic Gordon?" Mariquita inquired of her father.

"These gentlemen are in search of him," replied the signor, looking uneasy.

"Well, papa, you know where he is," said his daughter, calmly.

"How should I know?"

"Did you not send him away with Beppo to guide him?" asked the girl, fixing her large eyes on her father's face.

"Yes; but that is long ago."

"He was here for months, and he has not been long gone away. If you tell the signors where Beppo conducted him they can easily find him no doubt."

Something in the tone of the girl's voice attracted Ashton's attention. She seemed to speak and look with peculiar significance.

"I'll get a quiet chance to speak to her," he said to himself.

As the life in South America is different from that in other climes, less formal and freer, Ashton strolled out of the house to smoke a cigar.

The signor had introduced his fair daughter to the gentlemen, but she spoke no English, and therefore could converse with no one save the Scotland Yard detective.

When she saw him leave the room by the window which opened on the gallery, she raised her fan to her lips with a significant movement which Ashton understood.

She had something to tell him. Some disclosure to make.

In a moment he saw her slight form at the opposite end of the gallery.

He drew near and she thrust a paper into his hand, saying hurriedly:

"I dare not stay."

Then disappeared.

Ashton unfolded the paper and read these words:

"Frederic Cameron Gordon is on his way to New York. Say nothing to my father."

The detective knew he could rely on what Mariquita had written, and he saw that from some unknown reason the signor did not relate all he knew.

He told Ben Blunt and Seymour what he had just learned, and as there was no reason why they should remain any longer at the *Casa Madora* they returned to the city.

Here Seymour found a dispatch from Florida awaiting him. It was from Miss Gordon and said:

"Return at once; your man is in New York."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

FRESH LIGHT.

The night after Stella's story had been told and Miss Gordon had received Mr. Dalton's telegram, she was too excited to sleep. She rose and threw on a dressing-gown and lightly crossed the hall to Stella's room.

A thought had entered her mind in regard to Stella's communication.

She longed to ask a few questions.

"Stella!" she whispered softly, for if the girl slept she did not intend to disturb her.

"Yes. Oh, Miss Gordon, are you ill?"

"No, only restless. Lie still, dear. I only wish to ask you a few questions."

"Very well."

"Have you any objection to telling me a little more about this terrible man you were so unfortunate as to marry?"

"No," said Stella; "I will tell you everything with pleasure. I do not see why I should not."

"What is his proper name? You say the housekeeper was his sister."

"His name is Allan Gordon. That was the reason I did not mention it yesterday. He is really a Scottish nobleman, but cannot claim his title on account of the charge of murder against him."

"Gordon!" said Miss Gordon; "why he must belong to the elder branch of my father's family."

"His uncle's name was Sir Lester Gordon."

"And the man he murdered?"

"Was Major Kent."

"What?"

Miss Gordon sprung from her seat.

"Yes, Major Kent; his daughter is now trying to hunt him down."

Miss Gordon said no more. She had received a dispatch from Seymour from St. Thomas informing her where his head-quarters would be in Buenos Ayres, and the first thing she did as soon as she was dressed was to send the message flashing over the wire which created so much surprise when it arrived.

She did not tell Stella of her intention to do this, for she fancied the girl might still retain a lingering regard for the villain who had blighted her life.

This was not the case. Stella's pure nature forbade that she should cherish any particle of affection for a murderer and a profane blasphemer. He had grossly assailed her dead father, and by so doing had alienated even pity from her heart. Simple and childlike though she was her principles were very firm and severe. No Puritan of the old school could have possessed stricter opinions on the subject of what was right and what was wrong than this golden-haired, white-browed child. She knew just where the dividing line came, there existed no middle course for her.

Later Miss Gordon knew her better, and felt surprised by her stern and rigid principle. She never could have enacted the rôle Janet had played.

She had no mercy for the wicked, but it is a peculiarity of very youthful persons to be somewhat uncharitable. Advancing years teaches them to be more merciful; they know what it is to err, and need forgiveness.

Miss Gordon was in a fever of excitement during her journey to New York. When she arrived she drove directly to Mr. Dalton's house.

As the carriage laden with trunks drove up to the door, Fred, who was playing chess with Jessie, looked out of the window.

"Jessie," he cried, springing up and scattering kings, knights, queens, castles, etc., over the carpet, "it's aunt Lucille."

He tore down-stairs and opened the door with a bang, and before his aunt had time to exclaim "Fred!" he had her in his arms, while tears of joy from both their eyes were running down his blonde beard and moistening his shirt front.

Aunt Lucille was soon in Jessie's pretty morning-room, and every one was talking at once, while Miss Gordon held Fred by the hand as if she feared some one might wrest him from her.

When she heard how nearly he had been murdered by the treacherous villain he supposed to be a friend she became nearly wild.

"Have him arrested, Mr. Dalton," she cried; "why didn't you have him arrested before?"

"I can't have him arrested for attempted murder in Buenos Ayres, and besides we have no witnesses."

"Oh, the law! It disgusts me; it is only fit to protect villains."

Mr. Dalton smiled indulgently. He knew Miss Gordon was impulsive, and was not easily offended.

"What did you say this fellow's name was when he was in South America, Fred?" she inquired, suddenly.

Her nephew had mentioned the startling change in the color of his enemy's hair, and the thought flashed upon her that the man who had married Stella had changed the color of his hair and beard.

"Allan—Lester Allan. He is a deserter from the British army; he shot an officer against whom he entertained a feeling of revenge, because the officer had him branded on the back for a former desertion—My God! What's the matter?"

The exclamation was called forth by Stella, who had fallen upon the floor insensible.

"It's the same man!" cried Miss Gordon, an assertion which puzzled her audience, till Stella recovered and had been taken away by Maria and compelled to lie down and keep quiet when Miss Gordon explained her meaning.

They were more astonished than ever.

"Now," said the lawyer, thinking it was high time to introduce some legal lore, "my advice is

to say nothing and do nothing till this Mr. Seymour comes from South America, for if our man takes the alarm he will get off scot free."

"You are right," said Fred.

"And I must wait till then?" Miss Gordon exclaimed, making a face at the thought of the delay.

"If you do anything else he will escape, and Mr. Seymour will have a right to be very angry."

"But he may run away with all he can steal."

"Softly, my dear madame! He can run away with nothing. I have attached everything belonging to your nephew. Take my advice and keep quiet."

So it was decided that the old lady had to do what she hated most to do under the circumstances, viz:—keep quiet and be patient.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WAGES OF SIN—HAPPINESS.

"WELL," exclaimed Seymour, "we can all go home together, Ashton. You see, you were right; your man sailed in the Celia, and you might have obtained all the necessary information on the subject from that villainous Captain Mitchell, when you struck the trail, if he had not had a grudge against Blunt."

This was a diplomatic speech and did away with every unpleasant feeling the man from Scotland Yard had ever felt toward Miss Kent's intended husband.

None of the party were sorry when they were once more at sea on their homeward voyage to New York.

They were blessed with pleasant weather, and the voyage was a speedy one.

"Where shall we go?" asked Seymour, when Fire Island was past.

"It's all right," replied Blunt. "I've telegraphed to my boss; he'll go to Miss Gordon's house, and meet us with instructions."

The old servant had not yet been dismissed. To tell the truth, the usurper was afraid to take any decisive step.

He knew not what to do. He was hemmed in on every side. He began to curse his folly in permitting Janet to dispose of all the valuable furniture and other articles at the house on the banks of the Hudson, for he found himself short of ready money.

He had never been a smart business man, or ways and means of raising cash might have occurred to him.

As it was, he was at his wits' ends. People, too, began to look strangely at him. The story was beginning to leak out; he was virtually cut when it became known that Miss Gordon was in New York, residing at her lawyer's, and utterly repudiating the man who occupied her old home.

No one knew that Fred himself was in New York, for by Mr. Dalton's advice he kept very quiet.

Miss Gordon was terribly disappointed when her nephew informed her that his affections were bestowed upon the girl who had assisted to nurse him back to health after the murderous attack Allan Gordon had made upon him.

She had hoped that he might learn to love Stella, but she was obliged to relinquish that hope.

Stella knew that justice was about to overtake the man she had called by the endearing name of husband, and she calmly awaited the end. Her strict sense of justice overruled all the sentimental feelings natural to her age and sex.

She did not even pity him.

Ben Blunt was right; the messenger sent by the head men in his bureau met the party on the pier, and gave them Miss Gordon's address.

"I must lose no more time," said Ashton, and he hurried the others, who were only less anxious than himself to see him place his hand upon the shoulder of the murderer.

When they reached Mr. Dalton's house they learned the truth, and found to their surprise that they had unknowingly all been at work upon the same case.

"Now," said Ashton, briskly, "you may not know it, but the young lady is the one I want."

"How is that?" asked Mr. Dalton, while Stella turned pale.

"She knows that he is the man, and she must see him, and swear to it."

All eyes were turned on the pale, child-like face and slender form.

Could she bear such an ordeal? A fragile being like that?

She could.

"Very well," she said, in a low tone that thrilled all present, so full was it of subdued strength and resolution. "I am ready to go."

A carriage was sent for, and Stella, accompanied by Seymour, Ashton and Ben Blunt, drove to Miss Gordon's house; the others remained in the carriage, and Ashton rung the bell.

"I wish to see the master of the house," he said, quietly.

"I hardly think Mr. Gordon will see you, sir," replied the footman; "are you an agent or a canvasser?"

"No; I am here on important business."

"Well, sir, if you take a seat I'll take in your card."

He opened the door of the reception-room but Ashton remained standing in the hall. He had sent in a card bearing the name F. B. Clifford—he always kept a few cards on which were engraved different names to use in cases of this kind.

"Mr. Gordon is engaged, sir."

The footman had returned and began to open the door suggestively.

"I must see him, so I shall announce myself."

Before the footman recovered from his astonishment the detective was in the room where the impostor sat reading.

"I am from Scotland Yard, London, Allan Gordon, and I arrest you for the murder of Major Kent, committed at Guilford, in the county of Surrey, England, six years ago."

The man sprung to his feet with the cry of an animal at bay. He had expected all sorts of troubles from Frederic Gordon or his aunt, but he had lost sight for the time being of the greatest danger of all. He attempted a denial, but he was soon handcuffed and led away, and formed one of the number of passengers on the next steamer for the port of Liverpool.

His trial was a remarkable one; he escaped the gallows by a hair's breadth and was sentenced to penal servitude for life, as the murder was well-nigh forgotten, and the evidence purely circumstantial.

Frederic Gordon came into his fortune and place without the slightest trouble; he returned to Buenos Ayres and succeeded in gaining Signor Madura's consent to his marriage with his daughter. The old man's haughty spirit was subdued by Virgilio's refusal to wed Mariquita, and he no longer opposed her wishes to unite herself with the man of her heart. Mona and Juanita married and became the faithful attendants of the newly-wedded pair. They all sailed for New York, where they were received by Miss Gordon and her adopted daughter, Stella De Payster, who then sailed for Europe.

They first paid a visit to England, where they were warmly welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Frank Seymour, for Gertrude Kent kept her word and became Frank's wife when he returned from America.

Years have elapsed, and Stella is a rarely beautiful woman; but she favors no lover, and turns a deaf ear to all who try to win her favor.

She cannot forget her first terrible matrimonial venture, and devotes herself to her dear friend—who is really a mother to her—Miss Lucille Gordon.

Mariquita has little children and is very happy in her Northern home, and, of course, thinks there is no one like her modern Mazeppa.

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 715 Double-Voice Dan on Deck.
 703 Double-Voice Dan, the Always-on-Deck Detective.
 696 Double-Voice Dan, the Go-it Alone Detective.
 689 The Sparkler Sharp.
 676 Hurricane Hal, the Cowboy Hotspur.
 669 Old True Blue, the Trusty.
 663 The Giant Sport; or, Sold to Satan.
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 648 Gold Glove Gid, the Man of Grit.
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 571 Old Dismal, the Range Detective.
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910 The Arizona Detective.
 894 Silver Sam, the Shasta Sport.
 880 The Silver Sport's Double.
 88 The Race-Course Detective.
 6 The Hayseed Detective.
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 6 Fearless Sam, the Grand Combination Detective.
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 2 Jaunty Joe, the Jockey Detective.
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 526 Death-Grip, the Tenderfoot Detective.
 507 The Drummer Detective.
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 398 Sleepless Eye, the Pacific Detective.

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 902 Soft Velvet, the Man from Sandrock.
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 867 The Frisco Sport.
 852 The Stranger Sport's Shake-up.
 828 Kirk King, the Man from Kirby.
 818 Gentleman Dave, the Dead Game Sport.
 783 The King-Pin Tramp.
 767 The Sport of Silver Bend.
 718 Uncle Bedrock's Big Bounce.
 707 The Rival Rovers.
 687 Double Cinch Dan, the Sport With a Charm.
 677 Mr. Jackson, the Gent from Jaybird.
 659 Gilt-Edge Johnny; or, Roldan and His Rovers.
 650 Lucky Lester's Lone Hand.
 634 Old Handcart's Big Dump.
 622 The All Around Sports.
 603 Desert Alf, the Man With the Cougar.
 590 Gentle Jack, the High Roller from Humbug.
 578 Seven Shot Steve, the Sport with a Smile.
 568 The Duke Detective.
 558 Hurrah Harry, the High Horse from Halcyon.
 549 Belshazzar Brik, the Bailiff of Blue Blazes.
 533 Oregon, the Sport With a Scar.
 503 The Duke from Denver.
 478 Pinnacle Pete; or, The Fool from Way Back.
 459 Major Sunshine, the Man of Three Lives.
 429 Hair Trigger Tom of Red Bend.
 402 Snapshot Sam; or, The Angels' Flat Racket.
 396 The Piper Detective; or, The Gilt Edge Gang.
 375 Royal George, the Three in One.
 356 Thr'e Handsome Sports; or, The Combination.
 333 Derringr Dick, the Man with the Drop.
 268 Magic Mike, the Man of Frills.
 229 Captain Cut-sie-eve; or, The Little Sport.
 214 The Two Cool Sports; or, Gertie of the Gulch.
 182 Hands Up; or, The Knights of the Canyon.
 160 Soft Hand, Sharp; or, The Man with the Sand.
 145 Pistol Pards; or, The Silent Sport from Cinnabar.

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657 Long Tom, the Privateer.
 633 The Sea Spy.
 621 The Red Privateer; or, The Midshipman Rover.
 584 Fire Feather, the Buccaneer King.
 517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail.
 361 Tombstone Dick, the Train Pilot.
 122 Saul Saberday, the Idiot Spy.
 111 The Smuggler Captain; or, The Skipper's Crime.
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 116 The White Wizard; or, The Seminole Prophet.

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 827 Detective Walden's Web.
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 770 The Showman Detective.
 762 Old Grip, the Detective.
 740 Captain Clew, the Fighting Detective.
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 643 Castlemaine, the Silent Sifter.
 616 Magnus, the Weird Detective.
 606 The Drop Detective.
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 574 Old Falcon's Double.
 561 The Thug King; or, The Falcon Detective's Foe.
 548 Falconbridge, the Sphinx Detective.
 536 Old Falcon's Foe; or, The Detective's Swell Job.
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 477 Dead-arm Brandt.
 467 Mainwaring, the Salamander.
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 451 Griplock, the Rocket Detective.
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 424 Hawk Heron's Deputy.
 386 Hawk Heron, the Falcon Detective.

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752 The Suspect Sport of Daisy Drift.
 626 Ducats Dion, the Nabob Sport Detective.
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 591 Duke Daniels, the Society Detective.
 580 Shadowing a Shadow.
 565 Prince Paul, the Postman Detective.
 557 The Mountain Graybeards; or, Riddles' Riddle.
 519 Old Riddles, the Rocky Ranger.
 499 Twilight Charlie, the Road Sport.
 473 Gilbert of Gotham, the Steel-arm Detective.
 452 Rainbow Rob, the Tulip from Texas.
 436 Kentucky Jean, the Sport from Yellow Pine.
 422 Blue Grass Burt, the Gold Star Detective.
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 327 Terrapin Dick, the Wildwood Detective.
 315 Flush Fred's Double; or, The Squatters' League.
 308 Hemlock Hank, Tough and True.
 298 Logger Lem; or, Life in the Pine Woods.
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 209 Buck Farley, the Bonanza Prince.
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 377 Afloat and Ashore; or, The Corsair Conspirator.
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 224 Black Beard, the Buccaneer.
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 338 Jack Sands, the Boss of the Town.
 299 Three of a Kind; or, Dick, Despard and the Sport.
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 207 Old Hard Head; or, Whirlwind and his Mare.
 171 Tiger Dick, the Man of the Iron Heart.
 114 The Gentleman from Pike.
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895 Buffalo Bill's Secret Ally.
890 Buffalo Bill's Life-Stake.
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869 Buffalo Bill's Road-Agent Round-up.
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857 Buffalo Bill's Royal Flush.
851 Buffalo Bill's Double Dilemma.
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822 Buffalo Bill's Best Bower.
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812 Buffalo Bill's Death-Knell.
794 Buffalo Bill's Winning Hand.
787 Buffalo Bill's Dead Shot.
781 Buffalo Bill's Brand.
777 Buffalo Bill's Spy Shadower.
769 Buffalo Bill's Sweepstake.
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757 Buffalo Bill's Double.
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748 Buffalo Bill's Flush Hand.
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727 Buffalo Bill's Body Guard.
722 Buffalo Bill on the War-path.
716 Buffalo Bill's Scout Shadowers.
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658 The Cowboy Clan; or, The Tigress of Texas.
653 Lasso King's League; or, Buck Taylor in Texas.
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632 Buffalo Bill's Grip; or, Oath Bound to Custer.
629 Buffalo Bill's Pledge; or, The League of Three.
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175 Wild Bill's Trump Card; or, The Indian Heiress.
168 Wild Bill, the Pistol Dead Shot.

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820 White Beaver's Still Hunt.
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639 Buffalo Bill's Gold King.
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401 One-Armed Pard; or, Borderland Retribution.
397 The Wizard Brothers; or, White Beaver's Trail.
394 White Beaver, the Exile of the Platte.
319 Wild Bill, the Whirlwind of the West.
304 Texas Jack, the Prairie Rattler.
243 The Pilgrim Sharp; or, The Soldier's Sweetheart.
83 Gold Bullet Soort; or, Knights of the Overland.
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By Leon Lewis, Ned Buntline, etc.

773 Buffalo Bill's Ban; or, Cody to the Rescue.
682 Buffalo Bill's Secret Service Trail.
629 Buffalo Bill's Daring Role; or, Daredeath Dick.
517 Buffalo Bill's First Trail; or, The Express Rider.
158 Buffalo Bill, Chief of Scouts.
117 Buffalo Bill's Strange Pard; or, Dashing Dandy.
92 Buffalo Bill, the Buckskin King.

By Harold Payne.

883 The Man from Mexico in New York.
872 The King-Pin Shark; or, Thad Burr's Ten Strike.
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844 Tracked to Chicago.
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829 The Frisco Sharp's Cool Hand.
821 The Tramp Shadower's Backer.
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792 The Wall Street Sharp's Snap.
784 Thad Burr's Death Drop.
742 Detective Burr Among the New York Thugs.
734 Detective Burr's Foil; or, A Woman's Strategy.
728 Detective Burr, the Headquarters Special.
713 Detective Burr's Spirit Chase.
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698 Thad Burr, the Invincible; or, The "L" Clue.
690 The Matchless Detective.
680 XX, the Fatal Clew; or, Burr's Master Case.

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914 Snowflake Sam's Double.
897 The Six-Shot Spotter.
887 The Stranger Sport from Spokane.
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843 The Crescent City Sport.
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804 The King Pin of the Leadville Lions.
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723 Teamster Tom, the Boomer Detective.
709 Lodenstone Lem, the Champion of Chestnut Burr.
695 Singer Sam, the Pilgrim Detective.
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673 Stuttering Sam, the Whistler Sport of Santa Fe.
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618 Kansas Karl, the Detective King.
552 Prince Primrose, the Flower of the Flock.
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888 Nightshade in New York.
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871 The Crook Cashier.
859 Clew-Hawk Keene's Right Bower.
847 Hiram Hawk, the Harlem Detective.
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831 Shadowing the London Detective.
817 Plush Velvet, the Prince of Spotters.
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788 The Night-Hawk Detective.
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766 Detective Zach, the Broadway Spotter.
751 The Dark Lantern Detective.
736 The Never-Fail Detective.
724 Captain Hercules, the Strong Arm Detective.
711 Dan Damon, the Gilt-Edge Detective.
701 Silver Steve, the Branded Sport.
694 Gideon Grip, the Secret Shadower.
684 Velvet Van, the Mystery Shadower.
678 The Duke Desperado.
671 Jason Clew, the Silk-Handed Ferret.
664 Monk Morel, the Man-Hunter.
654 Sol Sphinx, the Ferret Detective.
642 Red Pard and Yellow.
608 Silent Sam, the Shadow Sphinx.
592 Captain Sid, the Shasta Ferret.
579 Old Cormorant, the Bowery Shadow.
569 Captain Cobra, the Hooded Mystery.
559 Danton, the Shadow Sharp.
550 Silk Hand, the Mohave Ferret.
543 The Magnate Detective.
532 Jack Javert, the Independent Detective.
523 Reynard of Red Jack; or, The Lost Detective.
512 Captain Velvet's Big Stake.
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496 Richard Redfire, the Two Worlds' Detective.
487 Sunshine Sam, a Chip of the Old Block.
480 Hawkspear, the Man with a Secret.
468 Coldgrip in Deadwood.
460 Captain Coldgrip, the Detective.
453 Captain Coldgrip's Long Trail.
447 Volcano, the Frisco Spy.
441 The California Sharp.
434 Lucifer Lynx, the Wonder Detective.
421 Father Ferret, the Frisco Shadow.
413 Captain Coldgrip in New York.
407 Captain Coldgrip's Nerve; or, Injun Nick.
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392 The Lost Bonanza; or, The Boot of Silent Hound.
383 The Bonanza Band; or, Dread Don of Cool Clan.
374 Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities.
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352 The Desperate Dozen.
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790 Plunger Pete, the Race Track Detective.
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703 Spokane Saul, the Samaritan Suspect.
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